

The Winter's Tale



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare's father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by King James as the King's Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The play does not take place at any specific historical time, though the elements of pastoral romance in the play are drawn from a genre (pastoral) that was specifically very popular in the early modern period.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Shakespeare took the main plot of *The Winter's Tale* from a pastoral romance entitled *Pandosto*, by Robert Greene. He adapted the plot slightly in order to create his own play—Hermione's miraculous return at the end of the play, for example, is a Shakespearean invention.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Winter's Tale*
- **When Written:** 1611
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1623
- **Literary Period:** The Renaissance (1500-1660)
- **Genre:** Drama, Comedy, Tragicomedy
- **Setting:** Sicilia (the island of Sicily) and Bohemia (where the modern-day Czech Republic is)
- **Climax:** The plot is essentially split into two halves, and each can be seen as having its own climax. The first half of the play climaxes when Mamillius dies and Hermione appears to die, causing Leontes to realize his tragic error in assuming Hermione's guilt. The second half of the play climaxes when Perdita's true identity is revealed, Leontes' and Polixenes' families are reunited, and Hermione miraculously comes back to life.
- **Antagonist:** Leontes is the antagonist for most of the early parts of the play. His obsessive jealousy leads to the deaths

of Mamillius and Hermione, and Perdita and Camillo's having to leave Sicilia. Toward the end of the play, Polixenes is to some degree the antagonist, as he forbids Florizell from marrying Perdita, forces Florizell to flee Bohemia, and threatens to kill the shepherd and his son.

EXTRA CREDIT

Oracle of Where? The famous oracle of Apollo in the ancient world was located in Delphi. Because of this, many readers assume that Shakespeare, who had a limited classical education, mistakenly referred to Delphi as "Delphos" in *The Winter's Tale*. However, Delphos is actually an alternate name for the island of Delos, the mythical birthplace of Apollo and site of another Apollonian oracle. Shakespeare's apparent blunder is therefore actually a remarkably erudite detail (though one taken from his model, Robert Greene's *Pandosto*).



PLOT SUMMARY

The play begins in Sicilia, where king Polixenes of Bohemia is visiting his close friend Leontes, the king of Sicilia. One of Polixenes' noblemen named Archidamus speaks with Leontes' nobleman Camillo about Leontes' beloved young son Mamillius and the hospitality with which Leontes has welcomed the visiting Bohemians. At Leontes' court, Polixenes tells Leontes that he must leave and return to Bohemia. Leontes cannot convince Polixenes to extend his visit, but when Leontes' (pregnant) wife Hermione asks Polixenes to stay, he agrees. Polixenes tells Hermione about how close he and Leontes were as children, like "twinned lambs that did frisk i' th' sun." Suddenly, Leontes begins to suspect that the friendly affections traded between Hermione and Polixenes are romantic in nature. He wonders if he is even really the father of Mamillius. Polixenes and Hermione leave, and Leontes calls in Camillo. Leontes is absolutely convinced that his wife is having an affair with Polixenes, and orders Camillo to poison Polixenes. Leontes leaves, and Camillo considers his difficult position. He finally decides that he cannot kill Polixenes, even if this means disobeying his own king. Polixenes enters and Camillo eventually tells him about Leontes' suspicion and desire to have Polixenes killed. Polixenes and Camillo plan to flee for Bohemia together. Elsewhere in Sicilia, Hermione is playing with Mamillius. Leontes enters and learns from a lord that Camillo and Polixenes have left together for Bohemia. Leontes interprets this as confirmation of Polixenes' guilt, and he berates Hermione for being unfaithful. He suggests that Hermione is actually pregnant with Polixenes' child. Hermione insists that she is innocent, but Leontes has her thrown in jail. Paulina, a Sicilian noblewoman, visits Hermione in jail and

learns that Hermione has given birth to a daughter. Paulina takes the child to Leontes in the hopes that the sight of the infant might soften the king, but Leontes is still convinced that his wife has cheated on him, and that both Camillo and Polixenes have conspired against him. He claims that the newborn girl is a bastard child and says both Hermione and the baby should be thrown into a fire to be executed as punishment for her infidelity. Paulina calls Leontes a tyrant, and says that the baby is clearly his. Leontes angrily tells her husband Antigonus to keep control over his wife. He orders Antigonus to take the newborn child away and abandon it in “some remote and desert place.” Meanwhile, Leontes has sent two men—Cleomenes and Dion—to Delphos to get an oracle from Apollo declaring Hermione guilty or innocent. Cleomenes and Dion now return to Sicilia, both hoping that the written oracle they have brought “seal’d up” from Delphos will prove Hermione innocent. Leontes holds a public trial for Hermione, accusing her of cheating on him and conspiring against him with Polixenes. Hermione insists that she only loved Polixenes as a friend and says that she defends herself against Leontes’ accusation not in order to save her own life, but in order to save her reputation and honor. The oracle from Delphos is read aloud and it proclaims that Hermione and Polixenes are innocent, Camillo is “a true subject,” and Leontes will live without an heir if “that / which is lost be not found.” Leontes disregards the oracle and still believes his wife to be guilty. Suddenly, a servant enters and announces that Mamillius, who has been seriously ill, has now died. Hermione faints and Paulina takes her away, worried that the troubled woman is dying. She soon returns and announces that Hermione has died. Leontes finally realizes the error of his ways, and admits that he has been wrong. He plans to bury Mamillius and Hermione together and mourn them every single day.

Antigonus and a mariner land on the coast of Bohemia, where Antigonus plans to abandon Leontes’ infant daughter. He has seen a vision of Hermione in a dream, who told him to call the child Perdita (Latin for “she who has been lost”) and leave her somewhere in Bohemia. Antigonus abandons Perdita and is chased off-stage by a bear, which mauls him to death. A shepherd enters, finds Perdita, and decides to bring her home with him. The shepherd’s son enters and says he has seen a man (Antigonus) get eaten by a bear and a ship (the one on which Antigonus traveled) get wrecked in a violent storm.

Father Time comes on stage and announces that the play will now jump forward 16 years. The shepherd has raised Perdita as his daughter in Bohemia, while Leontes continues to mourn his wife and dead children in Sicilia. At the court of Polixenes, Camillo asks the king whether he can return to Sicilia. Leontes has apologized for driving Camillo away, and Camillo wants to return to his homeland. Not wanting to forgive Leontes, Polixenes refuses to allow Camillo to go to Sicilia. He asks Camillo if he has seen his son Florizell recently, who has

spending much time at a shepherd’s cottage. He asks Camillo to accompany him to this cottage in disguise, so they can figure out what the prince is up to. Out in the countryside, a trickster named Autolycus sees the shepherd’s son walking along, preparing to buy things for an upcoming sheep-shearing festival. Autolycus shouts out in pain and pretends that he has been robbed by someone named Autolycus. The shepherd’s son takes pity on him and offers him money. Autolycus declines, but steals his wallet. At the sheep-shearing festival, a great number of shepherds are all dressed up in costumes. Florizell is in attendance, dressed as a shepherd named “Doricles,” as are Camillo and Polixenes, described as herdsmen. Everyone celebrates the festival with garlands of flowers, songs, and dancing. Polixenes learns from the shepherd who adopted Perdita that Perdita and “Doricles” are love. Autolycus arrives at the festival and sells little trinkets (while also picking people’s pockets). Polixenes approaches Florizell in disguise and asks him about Perdita. He learns that Florizell plans to marry Perdita without his father’s approval, and Polixenes reveals who he really is. He effectively disowns Florizell, says that the shepherd will be killed, and threatens to have Perdita’s face “scratched with briars.” Polixenes leaves, and Camillo advises Florizell to flee his angry father and go to Sicilia, hoping that Polixenes will follow Florizell there and he will have an opportunity to go back to his homeland. Florizell exchanges clothes with Autolycus, so as not to be recognized, and leaves with Perdita to find a ship to go to Sicilia. Meanwhile, the shepherd and his son think that the only way to save their own lives is to tell Polixenes that Perdita is not really the shepherd’s daughter (so that her behavior is not his fault). Autolycus pretends to be a nobleman (since he is now wearing the prince Florizell’s clothes), and says he will take them to the king. In actuality, he sneakily plans to lead them to Florizell.

At Leontes’ court in Sicilia, Cleomenes and Dion attempt to persuade him that he has repented enough for Hermione’s death and should remarry. Paulina, though, insists that he cannot possibly repent for the wrong he did his wife, and should not remarry. Leontes promises not to marry anyone without Paulina’s approval. A servant enters and announces that Polixenes’ son Florizell has come from Bohemia along with “his princess.” Florizell enters and pretends that he and Perdita are married, and that he has come to Sicilia by the order of Polixenes. Just then, a lord enters and says that Polixenes is in Sicilia, seeking his son, who has fled Bohemia with a shepherd’s daughter. Florizell admits that this is the truth, and asks for Leontes’ help. Leontes agrees to plead on Florizell’s behalf to Polixenes. Elsewhere in Sicilia, Autolycus learns from several gentlemen, that Leontes, Polixenes, the shepherd and his son, Florizell, and Perdita all met in Leontes’ court. There, the shepherd revealed the bundle in which he originally found Perdita. This bundle had Hermione’s mantle in it, as well as a letter from Antigonus, proving Perdita to be Leontes’ long-lost daughter. Everyone rejoiced, although the shepherd’s son also

announced that Antigonus was killed by a bear, so Paulina found herself divided between joy for the return of Perdita and sadness at the death of her husband. After settling these matters, everyone decided to go to Paulina's house to visit a statue of Hermione. After the gentlemen from whom Autolycus learns all of this leave, the shepherd and his son enter, both dressed in noble clothes. Autolycus asks the shepherd's son to give him "good report to the Prince," and the shepherd's son promises to vouch for him if he should promise to be an honest man. Autolycus promises to be honest and good.

Leontes, Polixenes, Florizell, Perdita, Camillo, and Paulina all go together to see the statue of Hermione. Paulina reveals the statue, and Leontes is stunned at how lifelike it is. He even thinks that it seems to have aged appropriately in the sixteen years since it was made after Hermione's death. Leontes is greatly moved by the sight of the statue, and thinks that it appears to breathe and have veins carrying actual blood. Paulina tells everyone to prepare "for more amazement," and says that she can make the statue move. She calls out for the statue to awake, and it starts to move. Paulina tells everyone not to be afraid, and assures them her spell is "lawful." The now living Hermione embraces Leontes and is happy to see her daughter Perdita. Paulina encourages everyone to go somewhere to rejoice at their good fortune, while she laments the death of Antigonus. Leontes tells her not to be sad, and suggests that she marry Camillo, who he now knows is an honest, good man. He suggests that she join them all as they go to tell each other about what each person has done in the sixteen years since Hermione's supposed death, and everyone leaves the stage together.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Leontes – The king of Sicilia. While his close childhood friend Polixenes is visiting him, he suddenly suspects that Polixenes is sleeping with his wife Hermione. He quickly becomes consumed by intense jealousy, and flies into a rage, trying to get Polixenes killed and throwing Hermione in jail. He puts Hermione on trial, but refuses to be persuaded of her innocence, even by an oracle of Apollo. He orders for the death of both Hermione and Perdita, whom he orders Antigonus to abandon out in a deserted wilderness. After the deaths of his wife and son Mamillius, though, he realizes the error of his ways, and tries to repent for what he has done. In the second half of the play, Leontes seems to have learned his lesson and is welcoming to Florizell and Perdita, offering to try to help them reason with Polixenes. When Perdita's identity is revealed and Hermione miraculously comes back to life in Act 5, Leontes goes from tragic hero to a comic character happily reunited with his family and reconciled with his friend Polixenes.

Polixenes – The king of Bohemia and childhood friend of Leontes. Leontes suspects Polixenes of sleeping with his wife Hermione and tries to get Camillo to poison him. Camillo, though, helps Polixenes escape to Bohemia, where he lives for sixteen years apart from Leontes. In Bohemia, his son Florizell falls in love with Perdita, who appears to be a lowly shepherd's daughter. Apparently not having learned from the way Leontes alienated himself from his family, Polixenes forbids Florizell from marrying Perdita, causing him to run away to Sicilia. He follows his son there, and finally reconciles with Leontes. Once Perdita's true identity as Leontes's daughter is revealed, Polixenes happily agrees to the marriage.

Hermione – The wife of Leontes and the queen of Sicilia. Leontes falsely suspects her of having an affair with Polixenes, throws her in jail, and even orders for her death. Hermione insists on her innocence, and is exonerated by the oracle from Delphos, but Leontes still doesn't believe her. She dies in Act 2, and her death helps Leontes realize the error of his ways. Miraculously, in Act 5, she returns, as a memorial statue of her in Paulina's house comes to life. It is unclear whether Shakespeare intended for Hermione actually to die and then be resurrected, or whether she simply pretends to die in order to teach Leontes a lesson, and then pretends to be brought back to life miraculously, when she was actually living the whole time.

Paulina – A Sicilian noblewoman and the wife of Antigonus, Paulina is strong-willed and stands up for Hermione when Leontes accuses her of being unfaithful. She speaks her mind to Leontes, and brings him the infant Perdita in the hopes that the sight of his newborn child might soften his resolve to punish Hermione for the crime he imagines she has committed. After Leontes realizes that Hermione was innocent, Paulina never lets him forget his folly, and is never satisfied that Leontes has repented enough for causing Hermione's death. At the very end of the play, she is the one character who seems not to have found a happy ending, as she laments the death of her husband Antigonus. However, Leontes encourages her to find her own happy ending by marrying Camillo.

Camillo – A Sicilian nobleman and close advisor of Leontes. When Leontes suspects Polixenes of sleeping with his wife, he orders Camillo to poison Polixenes. Caught between his loyalty to his king and his knowledge that Polixenes is innocent, Camillo decides to help Polixenes escape Sicilia for Bohemia. Leontes thinks that Camillo is a traitor, but then later realizes that Camillo was actually right all along. After fleeing Sicilia, Camillo serves in Polixenes' court in Bohemia for sixteen years, before finally returning to Sicilia with Polixenes, who pursues his son there. Having realized his folly, Leontes apologizes to Camillo, and the two reconcile. At the very end of the play, Leontes even suggests that Camillo should marry Paulina.

Antigonus – A nobleman of Sicilia and the husband of Paulina. He is caught between his loyalty to his wife, who tries to

persuade Leontes that Hermione is innocent, and his loyalty to his king Leontes, who chides him for allowing his wife to dominate him. Leontes orders Antigonus to take the infant Perdita away and abandon her somewhere deserted. After seeing a vision of Hermione in a dream, he takes Perdita to Bohemia and leaves her alone in the wilderness (where she is later discovered by the shepherd). After doing this, he is suddenly chased after and killed by a bear, with absolutely no warning.

Florizell – Polixenes’ son and the prince of Bohemia. He falls in love with Perdita and is willing to defy both his father and the norms of social hierarchy by eloping with her, a mere shepherd’s daughter. After his love for Perdita is discovered by Polixenes, Florizell flees to Sicilia, forcing Polixenes to follow him there and reconcile with Leontes. Once Perdita’s true identity as the daughter of Leontes’s is revealed, Florizell is able to marry her without trouble.

Perdita – The daughter of Leontes and Hermione, whose name is Latin for “she who has been lost.” Leontes falsely believes that Perdita is the illegitimate child of Hermione and Polixenes, and orders for her to be abandoned out in the wilderness. After seeing a vision of Hermione in a dream, Antigonus takes Perdita to Bohemia and leaves her there. She is found by a shepherd and grows up as his daughter, but falls in love with Florizell, the prince of Bohemia. Even as a shepherd’s daughter, she comports herself in a noble manner, such that Leontes asks if she is a king’s daughter when he first sees her. At the end of the play, she is finally reunited with her parents and married to Florizell.

Shepherd – A lowly shepherd in Bohemia who happens to find the abandoned Perdita (as well as a large quantity of gold), left by Antigonus. He raises Perdita as his daughter and finds himself in mortal danger when Polixenes threatens to kill him after Perdita’s secret relationship with Florizell is discovered. He shows Polixenes (and Leontes) the bundle in which he found Perdita, though, proving that she is not his real daughter (and thus he is not accountable for her), and also unintentionally revealing Perdita’s true identity as Leontes’ long-lost daughter. As a reward for this, the shepherd and his son are made noblemen.

Shepherd’s Son – Referred to in some editions as simply “Clown”, he is the son of the shepherd. When Polixenes discovers the relationship between Florizell and Perdita, he threatens to punish both the shepherd and his son. The shepherd’s son then advises his father to show Polixenes the bundle in which Perdita was found, proving that she is not the shepherd’s actual daughter.

Autolycus – Autolycus is a trickster in Bohemia who robs the shepherd’s son, picks pockets at the sheep-shearing festival in Act 4, and tricks both the shepherd and his son to join Florizell’s boat to Sicilia. He is thoroughly (but playfully) dishonest, though he promises the shepherd and his son in Act

5 that he will reform and be an honest man. Autolycus never appears in the play after making this promise, so the sincerity of his promise is left ambiguous.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mamillius – The young son of Leontes and Hermione. He becomes sick when Hermione is falsely accused of having an affair with Polixenes, and dies while she is on trial. It is his death (along with Hermione’s) that propels Leontes to realize his folly in assuming his wife’s guilt.

Cleomenes – A Sicilian nobleman who, along with Dion, goes to Delphos to get an answer from the oracle of Apollo regarding whether or not Hermione is guilty of infidelity. Later in the play, he encourages Leontes to remarry.

Dion – Along with Cleomenes, Dion travels to Delphos for the oracle early in the play, and later advises Leontes to remarry.

Father Time – An allegorical figure representing time itself, Father Time comes on-stage at the beginning of Act 4 to announce the play’s sixteen-year jump forward in time.

Archidamus – A Bohemian gentleman visiting Sicilia in Act 1. As the play begins, he talks with Camillo about the Sicilians’ friendly hospitality, the close friendship between Leontes and Polixenes, and the vibrant youth of Mamillius.

Emilia – One of Hermione’s attendants, who meets Paulina when she goes to see Hermione in jail.

Mopsa – A shepherdess who attends the sheep-shearing festival in Act 4. The shepherd’s son buys her some ribbons from Autolycus.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



LOYALTY, FIDELITY, AND HONESTY

Issues of loyalty, fidelity, and honesty are crucial to the play’s main plot points. Camillo’s exile from and return to Sicilia, for example, are based on his presumed disloyalty and actual loyalty to his king Leontes. And Hermione’s perceived lack of marital fidelity is what causes Leontes to order for her death. There is a variety of different kinds of loyalty in the play, all doubted at various points: fidelity in marriage (as between Hermione and Leontes), trust in friendship (as between Leontes and Polixenes), and loyalty to one’s family (as between Florizell and his father Polixenes).

Several characters in the play think that they are upholding the

importance of loyalty or punishing disloyalty, only to find that they are in some way doing the exact opposite. Leontes thinks that he is championing the importance of marital fidelity and honesty when he tries to arrange for the deaths of Hermione, Polixenes, and Perdita, but in turning on his own family and dear friend he actually displays a lack of loyalty to them. His paranoia and descent into obsessive jealousy is a betrayal of both his wife Hermione and his childhood friend Polixenes. Later in the play, Polixenes similarly tries to enforce an idea of honesty and loyalty, when he stops his son from trying to marry Perdita without his knowledge. He thinks Florizell is being a dishonest or disloyal son, but Florizell is only being honest to his feelings of genuine love for Perdita. And as Polixenes' insistence on the matter drives his own son away from his homeland, his behavior can perhaps even be seen as a form of paternal disloyalty. As Leontes and Polixenes both demonstrate, upholding loyalty and honesty is not always a straightforward matter. Thus, Camillo, one of the few characters to be honest and virtuous throughout the play, faces a difficult dilemma when ordered by Leontes to kill Polixenes: he can either kill an innocent man and remain loyal to his king, or betray his king in order to remain loyal to a larger idea of virtue. Similarly, Antigonus is forced to abandon the helpless infant Perdita in Bohemia out of loyalty to Leontes' commands. Throughout the play, then, those who attempt to uphold loyalty most vigorously end up committing the play's most heinous acts, while those who actually behave with true fidelity and honesty (Camillo, for example) must commit apparent acts of betrayal. Thus, while the play revolves around the importance of various forms of loyalty, it shows that such matters are never simple: loyalty can be a matter of perspective, and must be balanced against other forms of honesty, duty, and virtue.



FRIENDSHIP AND LOVE

The Winter's Tale explores different kinds of relationships between family members, spouses, and friends. The play is especially interested in the strong friendship between Leontes and Polixenes. In the first scene of the play, Camillo and Archidamus speak of the kings' close relationship, and soon after Polixenes describes the two of them as like "twinned lambs" in their youth, frolicking innocently together. Their perfect friendship is complicated, though, as they mature and take wives, moving from their male friendship (what some critics would term a "homosocial" relationship) toward heterosexual romance. This introduces the possibility of jealousy, which destroys the friendship between Polixenes and Leontes.

Part of the reason that marriage and romantic love complicate the strong friendship between the two kings is that it forces them to try to balance different degrees of love. Polixenes insists that he only loves Hermione as a friend, just as he loves Leontes. Leontes, however, interprets Polixenes' affection

toward Hermione as signs of a very different kind of love. This problem points to a recurrent theme throughout the play: the conflict between different kinds and degrees of love and affection. Florizell's love for Perdita, for example, threatens to break up the familial love between his father and him. As the play progresses, various romances and friendships are complicated and broken up. But the play's comic resolution ends with virtually all these relationships rebuilt. And in this happy ending, the play does not seem to prioritize one form of relationship over another. Leontes appears equally happy to be reunited with his long-time friend Polixenes and with his wife and daughter. The play thus celebrates the proliferation of human relationships that all arise out of some form of love—for a friend, for a child, for a spouse—without assuming that one is more important than the others.



YOUTH, AGE, AND TIME

Shakespeare's play signals its interest in time rather obviously in the beginning of act four, when Father Time himself comes on-stage and introduces a (remarkable) sixteen-year jump forward in the play. Time's inevitable movement forward affects everything in the play: thanks to the temporal jump forward in act four, we see time age Leontes, Polixenes, Paulina, and others. We also see Perdita grow from an infant to a young woman ready for marriage. Even the statue of Hermione at Paulina's house seems to age with time, as in act five it appears to have acquired some wrinkles over the sixteen years since its being made. (However, this may simply be Hermione herself; critics disagree about whether the statue is real or simply Hermione in disguise, who never actually died.) As the play emphasizes the progression of time, it repeatedly glorifies the innocence of youth. In the opening scene, Camillo says that the young Mamillius gives otherwise hopeless old Sicilians a reason for continuing to live. And Polixenes compares Leontes and himself as children to two "twinned lambs" who were innocent even of original sin. The inevitable process of aging is thus somewhat tragic, represented as a loss of innocence.

But, the play does show some possibilities for finding happiness amid the unstoppable progression of time. One such remedy is through children. When Leontes sees Florizell, he is amazed at the young man's resemblance to a young Polixenes. The older generation of characters in the play is able to relive their youth to some extent, or at least see their youth reborn in the younger generation of their children. Moreover, the play ends with Leontes looking optimistically toward the future. He encourages Paulina to remarry with Camillo, rather than dwelling on the unhappy end of her former husband Antigonus. Thus, while not abandoning the memory of the past, the play concludes by suggesting hope for improvement in the future. No one can escape time's constant movement forward, but the progression of time and aging need not be entirely cause for

lament.



SERIOUSNESS, LEVITY, AND HUMOR

The Winter's Tale is notorious as a so-called "problem play," because among the plays of Shakespeare it is one of the most difficult to categorize in terms of genre. It begins like a tragedy, but then has an extended episode drawn from pastoral romance, and ends like a comedy. This mixed-up quality of the play is about more than simply categorizing Shakespeare's play. Its genre-bending nature speaks to its unique—and at times bewildering—mixture of seriousness and levity, sadness and humor. The play begins as a tragedy, with Leontes unwittingly bringing about his own suffering due to the fault of his paranoiac jealousy. (His angry jealousy regarding his wife's supposed infidelity is very similar to that of Othello, from one of Shakespeare's best-known tragedies.) But when the play moves to Bohemia, the play approaches the genre of Renaissance pastoral romances, which emphasized the pleasures of the countryside, playful enjoyment, and young love. This portion of the play reaches a peak with the light-hearted sheep-shearing festival of act four. Finally, the play concludes like a comedy, which is to say it has a (more or less) happy ending. Comedies are defined as opposed to tragedies by having this kind of an ending with a resolution to the characters' problems and a return to normalcy.

Not only does the play progress from genre to genre, but it also mixes genres at the same time. So, for example, Antigonus dies tragically but after being pursued off-stage suddenly by a bear who appears out of nowhere in a sudden stage direction ("He exits, pursued by a bear.") that has an element of slap-stick comedy to it. And at the end of the play, while almost all the characters have achieved a comic resolution and happy ending, Paulina is left without her husband. She says that she will lament and grieve while everyone else celebrates their good fortune, marking her in a sense as a tragic character stuck in a comic ending. But Leontes then encourages her to move on from the past and marry Camillo. By doing this, he essentially encourages her (and the play itself) to move from tragedy to comedy.

This mixing of genres can be somewhat confusing for audiences. Each genre implies an expected response on the part of audiences and readers. One knows to laugh at a comedy, to feel pathos at a tragedy, to take light-hearted pleasure in a romance. By mixing these genres, Shakespeare complicates our idea about what the "correct" response to his play should be. But since life doesn't always obey the strict rules of genre that separate tragedy from comedy, why should literature? Shakespeare's generic experimentation may simply bring his play closer to the strange mix of comedy and tragedy, laughter and tears, and pleasure and despair that makes up life itself.



EVIDENCE, TRUTH, PERSUASION, AND BELIEF

Once Leontes is convinced that his wife has cheated on him, he makes up his mind and remains stubborn. No one can persuade him otherwise, and no proof or evidence can change his firm (but false) belief in Hermione's infidelity. As Hermione is put on trial, and Leontes sends men to get an oracle from Delphos (which he ultimately ignores), a central concern of the early part of the play is what might count as definitive proof or evidence in Hermione's trial. What evidence is strong enough to prove the truth, to alter Leontes' belief? And how can anyone persuade Leontes to change his mind?

These kinds of questions pervade the play, with its many scenes of persuasion—for example, Autolcyus tricking and persuading the shepherd and his son to do as he wishes, or Cleomenes and Dion's unsuccessful attempt to persuade Leontes to remarry, or Leontes' persuading Paulina to marry Camillo. Through Leontes' misguided belief in Hermione's guilt, the play shows how strong such false beliefs can be, even in the face of reasoned persuasion and strong evidence. Leontes discounts Hermione's own word (as well as Paulina's) and the oracle from Delphos that declares Hermione innocent. Only after his wife and son die does he realize the error of his ways.

Later in the play, though, strong evidence is enough to alter people's beliefs and reveal the truth, when the shepherd shows Polixenes and Leontes the bundle in which he found Perdita. This object reveals Perdita's true identity, allows her to reunite with her father, and also allows Perdita and Florizell to marry. The plot of *The Winter's Tale* is driven by repeated mistaken beliefs and acts of persuasion both successful and unsuccessful. But as the play concludes, the truth is inevitably revealed. People may adhere strongly to false beliefs and even disregard definitive evidence, the play suggests, but in the end the truth always comes out.



JUSTICE AND NATURAL ORDER

The Winter's Tale abounds in unfair punishments and faulty attempts to enforce justice. Leontes unfairly punishes Hermione for a crime she hasn't committed, leading not only to her death but also to the death of Mamillius and the abandonment of Perdita. And Polixenes, after discovering his son's secret engagement to Perdita, drives him out of Bohemia and unfairly threatens to punish Perdita's shepherd father for her relationship with his son. The play can even be seen as being divided into two halves, with each one dealing with a king's misguided attempt to uphold justice.

If these two main characters who are so invested in carrying out justice are so mistaken, where is true justice to be found in the play? One answer is that actual justice in *The Winter's Tale* is closely associated with things' being in their rightful place, with

a natural order being established and maintained. The escalating problems of the play can be seen as repeated disruptions of this natural order: Camillo is exiled from his rightful homeland; Leontes' family is broken up and separated; Leontes and Polixenes' friendship is ruined; Perdita goes from her rightful social standing to the low status of a shepherd's daughter (though her naturally noble character is still apparent in her behavior); and Perdita grows up in the wrong household, with the wrong father. All of these reversals and disruptions are given a playful encapsulation in the sheep-shearing festival of act four, where all the characters are costumed and playing roles other than their natural identities. The king Polixenes, for example, is disguised as a mere citizen, while Florizell is dressed as a lowly herdsman.

Just as the sheep-shearing festival must end and everyone must return to their actual identities, the various displacements and disruptions of natural order are resolved in the play's (mostly) happy conclusion. Perdita is returned to her rightful parents (who are themselves reunited), the shepherd and his son are cleared of any guilt and even given noblemen's clothes, Florizell and Polixenes are reunited, and Leontes and Polixenes are reconciled. It is through this reestablishment of the natural order of things—and not through either of the kings' deliberate dictates or actions—that justice is finally brought about at the end of the play.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE SEASONS

The play's title hints at the importance of the seasons, and while they are not always an obvious motif throughout the play, the seasons (in particular winter and summer) form a significant background to the action of the play. The first three acts of the play take place in winter, as is hinted when Mamillius prepares to tell Hermione a story and tells her, "a sad tale's best for winter." Acts 4 and 5, in contrast, take place in the spring and summer (the exact time is ambiguous), as is made clear by the occasion of the sheep-shearing festival in Bohemia. As Mamillius' comment suggests, each season has particular associations appropriate to it. Cold winter is often associated with old age, death, and grimness. As such, it is appropriate for the first, tragic half of *The Winter's Tale*, in which the older generation of characters is at the center of the action, and which climaxes with the deaths of Mamillius and Hermione (and also includes Antigonus' death). Spring symbolizes renewal, rebirth, and new beginnings, and is associated with youth. Thus, in the second half of the play, the younger characters (Perdita and Florizell, especially) take center stage,

and the tragic seriousness of the first three acts gives way to the light-heartedness of the sheep-shearing festival. Moreover, this part of the play reaches a climax with the "rebirth" of Perdita, as she becomes a princess once again, and with the apparent resurrection of Hermione. Both seasonal moments thus signify particular things, and emphasize aspects of the play that occur during each seasonal period. But since the play contains both time periods, it is ultimately a combination of the contradictory associations of both these times of year, just as it is a combination of the qualities of several genres (including tragedy and comedy).



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *The Winter's Tale* published in 2005.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

☝ I very well agree with you in the hopes of him: it is a gallant child; one that indeed physics the subject, makes old hearts fresh: they that went on crutches ere he was born desire yet their life to see him a man.

Related Characters: Camillo (speaker), Mamillius

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1.1.39-44

Explanation and Analysis

In this opening scene of the play, Camillo and a courier from Bohemia named Archidamus discuss visiting each other's countries, saying that the King of Sicilia (Leontes) owes the King of Bohemia (Polixenes) a visit. The reason a visit is owed is since Polixenes has stayed in Sicilia for so long. The discussion between Camillo and Archidamus mainly serves as exposition, explaining the situation and setting of the play's beginning. We learn that Leontes and Polixenes are childhood friends.

Here, toward the end of the short scene, they discuss Mamillius, the promising young son of Leontes. Camillo says that there is a lot of hope for the young prince, a "gallant child." The hope they see in the boy invigorates Sicilians, making old people wish to live longer so that they can see him become a man. Immediately, the promise of the young in contrast with the old, and the tension of time and aging is introduced into the play. Here aging is not tragic, but is rather exciting and empowering. The old, who might wish for time to slow down, desire for time to speed up so that they can experience Mamillius' growth into manhood. This

wish will be fulfilled in between acts III and IV, when Father Time himself announces that 16 years have passed.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

☝☝ Press me not, beseech you, so.
There is no tongue that moves, none, none i' the world,
So soon as yours could win me: so it should now,
Were there necessity in your request, although
'Twere needful I denied it.

Related Characters: Polixenes (speaker), Leontes

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1.2.26-30

Explanation and Analysis

Polixenes begins this scene by saying that he must return to Bohemia, since he has been in Sicilia for nine months. He thanks Leontes, who is like a brother, for his hospitality, but says he must part. Leontes asks his friend to stay longer, but Polixenes refuses.

Here Polixenes tells Leontes to drop it, saying that no one could possibly convince him more easily than Leontes, but in this situation, Polixenes must decline by necessity. The Bohemian king is extremely firm in his denial, and his insistence that no one ("no tongue that moves") could persuade him will act as fuel for Leontes' suspicions when Polixenes ultimately becomes convinced to stay. Note the repetition of the word *none* to enhance the surprising effect of Hermione's successful persuasion moments later.

☝☝ We were as twinn'd lambs that did frisk i' the sun,
And bleat the one at the other: what we changed
Was innocence for innocence; we knew not
The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dream'd
That any did. Had we pursued that life,
And our weak spirits ne'er been higher rear'd
With stronger blood, we should have answer'd heaven
Boldly 'not guilty;' the imposition clear'd
Hereditary ours.

Related Characters: Polixenes (speaker), Leontes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1.2.85-94

Explanation and Analysis

Hermione has persevered and persuaded Polixenes to extend his stay. Now that he's convinced, she takes the opportunity to ask him about his childhood friendship with her husband, Leontes. Polixenes responds with the poetic lines excerpted here, comparing himself and Leontes to "twinn'd lambs that did frisk i' the sun." He describes a picture of complete youthful innocence, saying the pair had no conception of doing wrong and could not even dream that anyone would.

If they had continued in this way of being, Polixenes says, and if they hadn't been raised with strong blood (royal bloodlines and lineage), they would have boldly been able to answer "not guilty" at their final judgment. However, Polixenes will go on to explain that the two men grew up, lost their innocence, and fell in love with their wives. The youthful innocence described here offers stark contrast with the jealous convictions that will soon overtake Leontes and the actions his jealousy will lead him to.

☝☝ Too hot, too hot!
To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods.
I have tremor cordis on me: my heart dances;
But not for joy; not joy. This entertainment
May a free face put on, derive a liberty
From heartiness, from bounty, fertile bosom,
And well become the agent; 't may, I grant;
But to be paddling palms and pinching fingers,
As now they are, and making practised smiles
As in a looking-glass, and then to sigh, as 'twere
The mort o' the deer; O, that is entertainment
My bosom likes not, nor my brows! Mamillius,
Art thou my boy?

Related Characters: Leontes (speaker), Polixenes, Hermione

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 1.2.139-151

Explanation and Analysis

When Polixenes and Hermione return from their side conversation, Leontes asks if his friend has yet been convinced; upon learning that Hermione has been successful, Leontes tells her that the only time she spoke to better purpose was the day she pledged her love for him. Leontes doesn't appear to be upset that his wife was able to

persuade Polixenes when he was not, even though Polixenes assured Leontes (as in the quote above) that no other tongue could possibly convince him more easily.

When Hermione gives Polixenes her hand, however, Leontes suddenly snaps. He is immediately possessed by jealousy, based only on the evidence of brief hand holding. In an aside, he exclaims, "Too hot, too hot!" The gesture is excessive, and to him seems absolute proof of his wife's guilt. He believes the two seem too familiar, and describes in detail the way they are holding hands, "paddling palms and pinching fingers," all the while making "practised smiles" like they might make in a mirror to appear genuine. Such "entertainment" does not sit well with Leontes, who has worked himself into such a jealous frenzy that at the end of these lines he questions if his son Mamillius is even his own.

●● Ha' not you seen, Camillo, —
But that's past doubt, you have, or your eye-glass
Is thicker than a cuckold's horn, —or heard, —
—For to a vision so apparent rumour
Cannot be mute, —or thought, —for cogitation
Resides not in that man that does not think, —
My wife is slippery?

Related Characters: Leontes (speaker), Camillo, Hermione, Polixenes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1.2.329-335

Explanation and Analysis

Leontes has sent Polixenes and Hermione off on a walk; he is now utterly convinced of his wife's infidelity, and believes that everyone in court has known all along. Leontes asks Camillio why he thinks Hermione was able to convince Polixenes to stay, trying to draw the truth out of him. When the confused Camillo does not play along, Leontes speaks the excerpted lines, wondering if Camillo really has not seen what is so plain to him.

He asks, "have you not seen, Camillo"—but stops himself since it is so obvious that he must have seen, unless his "eye-glass / Is thicker than a cuckold's horn." (A cuckold is a term for someone whose spouse cheats on them, often described as wearing figurative horns.) If he hasn't seen, Leontes says, he must have at least *heard* about the infidelity, since rumors must spread from "a vision so apparent." Leontes goes as far as to say that simply *thinking* about it will yield

the truth, and only a man who does not think would disagree with his conclusions. The single vision, grounded in sight, of the pair holding hands has thus spread to the ear and to thought and become evidence that amounts to absolute proof that Hermione is "slippery."

●● Is whispering nothing?
Is leaning cheek to cheek? is meeting noses?
Kissing with inside lip? stopping the career
Of laughing with a sigh? —a note infallible
Of breaking honesty —horsing foot on foot?
Skulking in corners? wishing clocks more swift?
Hours, minutes? noon, midnight? and all eyes
Blind with the pin and web but theirs, theirs only
That would unseen be wicked? is this nothing?
Why, then the world and all that's in't is nothing;
The covering sky is nothing; Bohemia nothing;
My wife is nothing; nor nothing have these nothings,
If this be nothing.

Related Characters: Leontes (speaker), Polixenes, Hermione

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 1.2.346-359

Explanation and Analysis

To Leontes' assertion that Hermione is slippery, Camillo responds that Hermione is innocent, and that Leontes has never said anything less appropriate than such a false accusation. But Leontes is absolutely convinced, obsessed, and infuriated. Already certain, he looks back on examples of the close friendship between Hermione and Polixenes and retroactively attributes sexual undertones and signs of infidelity to them.

He begins "Is whispering nothing?" suggesting that the two have been known to whisper. He continues listing their supposed behaviors, questioning if any of them could really be nothing. Being close physically? Meeting noses? Kissing? Laughing together? The list goes on to include a romantic desire for time to speed up (note that the obsessed Leontes breaks time down into its deviations and specific hours), and the desire for all eyes to be blind but those of the supposed lovers, so they can act freely while remaining unseen. He asks is all of this nothing?

If so, Leontes concludes that the world and all that it contains is nothing, that the sky is nothing, Bohemia is

noting, Hermione is nothing, nothing is nothing if these signs are not proof of what he knows to be true. Leontes has become so thoroughly convinced that he feels like the fabric of the world and his very reality would cease to exist with the loss of this core belief.

●● Swear his thought over
By each particular star in heaven and
By all their influences, you may as well
Forbid the sea for to obey the moon
As or by oath remove or counsel shake
The fabric of his folly, whose foundation
Is piled upon his faith and will continue
The standing of his body.

Related Characters: Camillo (speaker), Leontes

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1.2.511-518

Explanation and Analysis

Towards the end of this long scene, Camillo is explaining to Polixenes that he has been ordered to murder him because of Leontes' rigid belief that Hermione has been unfaithful. Here, Camillo tells Polixenes just how convinced Leontes has become. Leontes swears the truth of the infidelity "by each particular star in heaven and / By all their influences." We see that Camillo has caught the gravity of Leontes' powerful "Is this nothing?" speech, since he compares changing Leontes' mind to forbidding the sea to obey the moon. As we saw above, Camillo also notes that this "folly" has become the foundation of Leontes' faith and his very being. In other words, it is hopeless for Polixenes to try and assert his innocence, and so the best option is simply to flee.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

●● HERMIONE
Come, sir, now
I am for you again: pray you, sit by us,
And tell 's a tale.

MAMILLIUS
Merry or sad shall't be?

HERMIONE
As merry as you will.

MAMILLIUS
A sad tale's best for winter: I have one
Of sprites and goblins.

Related Characters: Hermione, Mamillius (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 2.1.28-34

Explanation and Analysis

This playful interaction between mother and son also shows the play's self-awareness and the tie of emotion and genre to the seasons. The pregnant Hermione asks her son Mamillius to tell her a tale (note Tale in the play's title), and the boy asks if it should be a happy or sad story. Hermione requests "merry," but Mamillius says that "A sad tale's best for winter," and plans to tell her instead of sprites and goblins.

Within these lines we see the genesis of or a reference to the play's title, the Winter's Tale. We also get a glimpse into the seasonal force of genre which dictates the play's action. This play is commonly categorized as a "problem play," since it is so difficult to place into the group of Shakespeare's Tragedies, Romances, Histories, or Comedies. Much of the plot so far is dark and tragic, hinging on jealousy and death threats. The tragic first three acts of the play fittingly (according to Mamillius) take place during winter—they tell a sad tale. But the final acts, which take place in the spring and summer, begin with absurdity and contain more comic elements, including a happy conclusion that ends with marriage (though a tinge of tragedy lingers, too).

Act 2, Scene 2 Quotes

☝☝ If she dares trust me with her little babe,
I'll show't the king and undertake to be
Her advocate to the loud'st. We do not know
How he may soften at the sight o' the child:
The silence often of pure innocence
Persuades when speaking fails.

Related Characters: Paulina (speaker), Hermione, Perdita, Leontes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 2.2.46-51

Explanation and Analysis

Paulina, the wife of the nobleman Antigonus, tries to visit Hermione in jail, but she is prevented by the guard. One of Hermione's attendants informs Paulina that Hermione has given birth to a daughter, and Paulina laments the terrible situation and the madness of Leontes that has resulted in Hermione's imprisonment. Here, she thinks of a plan to bring Leontes to his senses and help Hermione.

Paulina says that if Hermione will trust her with the newborn, she will take the baby to the King and advocate for Hermione's innocence. She believes that it is possible Leontes will "soften at the sight o' the child." Paulina says that "the silence often of pure innocence / Persuades when speaking fails." We can note two intertwined aspects of this plan to convince Leontes to release Hermione. First, note that this attempt means to use silence as opposed to language. All discussion of convincing Polixenes to stay in the first place was in terms of language and the tongue, but it has become clear that no amount of verbal reasoning or appeal can change Leontes' mind about his wife's infidelity. Second, Paulina plans to appeal with youth and innocence. Recalling Polixenes' lines about the innocent young kings, we know that youths are idealized as perfectly innocent, almost holy figures. Paulina hopes this innocence will translate from daughter to mother, aligning with the line that (according to Emilia) Hermione spoke to her baby in prison: "My poor prisoner, / I am innocent as you."

Act 2, Scene 3 Quotes

☝☝ Mark and perform it, see'st thou! for the fail
Of any point in't shall not only be
Death to thyself but to thy lewd-tongued wife,
Whom for this time we pardon. We enjoin thee,
As thou art liege-man to us, that thou carry
This female bastard hence and that thou bear it
To some remote and desert place quite out
Of our dominions, and that there thou leave it,
Without more mercy, to its own protection
And favour of the climate. As by strange fortune
It came to us, I do in justice charge thee
On thy soul's peril and thy body's torture
That thou commend it strangely to some place
Where chance may nurse or end it. Take it up.

Related Characters: Leontes (speaker), Paulina, Antigonus, Perdita

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 2.3.211-224

Explanation and Analysis

The dramatic exchanges of this scene preceding the excerpted speech can be summarized thus: Paulina's plan to present Leontes with his newborn daughter and thereby exonerate Hermione fails miserably. Leontes calls Paulina a traitor, and calls her husband a traitor too, one who should be hanged for his inability to control Paulina. Members of the court try to intervene and save the child, but Leontes, believing to act with justice, behaves like a tyrant and refuses to hear them.

In this speech he makes his final decision regarding the life of the child, of Paulina, and of Antigonus. Beginning with "mark and perform it," meaning listen and do what I say, Leontes starts by saying that if Antigonus does not obey he and his "lewd-tongued wife" (whom Leontes for now has pardoned) will be executed. We can note that the tyranny that has been building in the scene has reached its climax, as Leontes has now switched grammatically into using the formal, royal "we," giving this speech the air of an official decree and reminding us that, though he is maddened by jealousy, he is still a king.

The instructions are as follows: take the baby away and bring her to a remote place outside of Leontes' kingdom; leave the baby there without help, so that its survival is completely dependent on chance. Leontes conceives of this as complete justice, failing to see a problem with the unnatural rejection of his own daughter.

Act 3, Scene 2 Quotes

☝☝ This sessions, to our great grief we pronounce,
 Even pushes 'gainst our heart: the party tried
 The daughter of a king, our wife, and one
 Of us too much beloved. Let us be clear'd
 Of being tyrannous, since we so openly
 Proceed in justice, which shall have due course,
 Even to the guilt or the purgation.

Related Characters: Leontes (speaker), Hermione, Perdita

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3.2.1-7

Explanation and Analysis

In a court of justice, Leontes begins this scene and the trial with another formal speech given in the royal "we" tense. He claims that it is with grief that he must preside over these proceedings, since the one being tried is "the daughter of a king, our wife, and one / Of us too much beloved." One meaning of this last statement is that it is difficult to have this trial since Leontes loves Hermione so much, but another reading is that he loved her too much, meaning that since she was unfaithful, she was deserving of less love.

Leontes then tries to absolve himself of any tyrannous behavior, claiming to openly proceed in justice, which he says must be followed no matter if Hermione is innocent or guilty. We know, however, that Leontes will not be swayed no matter what. The jealous thought has become his core belief, the ground on which his reality stands, and despite his attempts to verbally or rationally appear just, he is still acting tyrannous.

☝☝ Since what I am to say must be but that
 Which contradicts my accusation and
 The testimony on my part no other
 But what comes from myself, it shall scarce boot me
 To say 'not guilty:' mine integrity
 Being counted falsehood, shall, as I express it
 Be so received. But thus: if powers divine
 Behold our human actions, as they do,
 I doubt not then but innocence shall make
 False accusation blush and tyranny
 Tremble at patience.

Related Characters: Hermione (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 3.2.23-33

Explanation and Analysis

In this long speech, Hermione proclaims her innocence, though she knows that her testimony will not be able to convince Leontes of the truth. Her testimony and language alone must change Leontes' mind, and she knows that her integrity is counted as falsehood. In other words, she knows that her testimony will not be believed, because her very integrity is under attack in the accusation. However, she remains proud, honorable, and hopeful, and she strives to tell the truth. Hermione appeals to divine powers, saying that if they happen to be observing (as she knows they do), then she knows that her innocence will end this false accusation and make "tyranny / Tremble at patience." This powerful, emotional language introduces an impressive performance in which she will compare the level of her current sadness to her consistent level of faithfulness.

☝☝ For Polixenes,
 With whom I am accused, I do confess
 I loved him as in honour he required,
 With such a kind of love as might become
 A lady like me, with a love even such,
 So and no other, as yourself commanded:
 Which not to have done I think had been in me
 Both disobedience and ingratitude
 To you and toward your friend, whose love had spoke,
 Even since it could speak, from an infant, freely
 That it was yours. Now, for conspiracy,
 I know not how it tastes; though it be dish'd
 For me to try how: all I know of it
 Is that Camillo was an honest man;
 And why he left your court, the gods themselves,
 Wotting no more than I, are ignorant.

Related Characters: Hermione (speaker), Polixenes, Leontes, Camillo

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 3.2.65-81

Explanation and Analysis

Hermione has made her first speech of the trial, but Leontes still does not believe her. Here, Hermione gives another speech in which she attempts to differentiate romantic and

platonic love. She says that she loved Polixenes "as in honour he required, / With such a kind of love as might become / a lady like" her. In other words, she loved Polixenes as a friend, as a king deserves to be loved, and furthermore as Leontes, a dear friend to Polixenes, commanded her to.

Hermione goes on to say that if she hadn't loved Polixenes in this way, it would have been actual disobedience and ingratitude, opposing the nonsensical, jealously-based infidelity she is accused of. Hermione has no idea why Camillo left court or what is going on; she maintains that she truly is innocent.

Her claim here that her friendship was non-romantic and ordered by her husband is both clever and unique. By framing the love as a duty to her husband, she masterfully reverses the accusation and seems to act as a faithful wife should. If Leontes were not so possessed by jealousy, it is possible that her argument would have worked. But its uniqueness is also a reason it might seem unbelievable. Her notion of a non-romantic friendship between man and woman would have been uncommon, perhaps even revolutionary during the Renaissance.

☛ There is no truth at all i' the oracle:
The sessions shall proceed: this is mere falsehood.

Related Characters: Leontes (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 3.2.151-152

Explanation and Analysis

When Leontes refuses to be convinced, Hermione appeals to the Oracle of Apollo, which proclaims that she is chaste, Polixenes is innocent, Camillo is a true subject, and Leontes is a jealous tyrant. The Oracle also threatens that Leontes will go without an heir if the situation is not rectified ("if that which is lost is not found").

But Leontes immediately rejects the oracle, saying that there is no truth in it whatsoever, and that the prophesy is pure falsehood. Again, we see how conventional methods available to his subjects—reason, religion, appeals to his good nature with innocent children—fail to break the spell of jealousy and alert Leontes to the truth of Hermione's faithfulness. He trusts his own belief in this matter over the very words of the gods.

However, immediately following these lines, a servant

informs Leontes of Mamillius' tragic death, the once promising youth having weakened and grown ill in the turmoil of his mother's accusation and trial. Hermione faints at the news, and Leontes immediately repents and cries out to Apollo that he will try to atone for his actions.

☛ O, think what they have done
And then run mad indeed, stark mad! for all
Thy by-gone fooleries were but spices of it.
That thou betray'dst Polixenes,'twas nothing;
That did but show thee, of a fool, inconstant
And damnable ingrateful: nor was't much,
Thou wouldst have poison'd good Camillo's honour,
To have him kill a king: poor trespasses,
More monstrous standing by: whereof I reckon
The casting forth to crows thy baby-daughter
To be or none or little; though a devil
Would have shed water out of fire ere done't:
Nor is't directly laid to thee, the death
Of the young prince, whose honourable thoughts,
Thoughts high for one so tender, cleft the heart
That could conceive a gross and foolish sire
Blemish'd his gracious dam: this is not, no,
Laid to thy answer: but the last, —O lords,
When I have said, cry 'woe!' the queen, the queen,
The sweet'st, dear'st creature's dead,
and vengeance for't
Not dropp'd down yet.

Related Characters: Paulina (speaker), Leontes, Polixenes, Hermione, Camillo, Perdita, Mamillius

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3.2.201-222

Explanation and Analysis

In this stunning speech, Paulina chastises the King at length for his folly and the damage it has wrought. The "they" she refers to in the first quoted line are Leontes' jealous and tyrannical actions, which have caused terrible things to happen, all of which she will outline below.

Leontes betrayed his dear friend Polixenes over "nothing" (note the irony of this term returning after Leontes' earlier speech involving nothing). Leontes would have poisoned Camillo's honor, since he ordered him to commit regicide (kill a king). He cast off his daughter, a cruelty Paulina says surpasses even a devil, and caused the death of his tender son. But the climactic speech ends with a crushing final blow: Hermione too is now dead.

Paulina's fury is a staggering display of emotion and power over the king. This reversal of the natural order shows two traditional dichotomies flipped: subject over king and woman over man. What's more, a few lines later Leontes will say "Go on. Go on. / Thou canst not speak too much." He gives her leave, embracing his anguish and believing himself deserving of bitterness from all tongues.

Act 3, Scene 3 Quotes

☝ I would there were no age between sixteen and three-and-twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancients, stealing, fighting.

Related Characters: Shepherd (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 3.3.65-69

Explanation and Analysis

Following the inversions that occur at the end of Act 3, Scene 2, this scene sets the stage for winter to become spring, for time to leap forward, and for tragedy to shift to comedy. The means for these shifts (and the signal that it is occurring) is the introduction of a level of absurdity and excess which drags the play beyond the tragic into a realm of ridiculousness, firmly cementing its status as a "problem play."

Moments before the Shepherd enters and speaks these lines, Antigonus abandons baby Perdita as he was instructed by Leontes. Antigonus leaves the stage with possibly the most famous stage direction ever written: "*He exits, pursued by a bear.*" The introduction of a literal bear that follows him and kills him off stage is clearly tragic, but also appears too silly for a true tragedy. Lines later, this silliness is echoed in the form of excessiveness, when the Shepherd's Son says that he has witnessed both the bear attack and a violent shipwreck all in a few moments.

The lines of prose excerpted here are spoken by the Shepherd as he enters the stage, moments before he discovers Perdita. His complaints echo the tie between youth and innocence, and the notion that the passage of time and aging result in a loss of innocence. Ironically, after this scene ends the play will leap forward sixteen years and transition fully to the mode of comedy, seeming to reverse with a shift towards innocence accompanying age.

Act 4, Scene 4 Quotes

☝☝ Thou dearest Perdita,
With these forced thoughts, I prithee, darken not
The mirth o' the feast.

Related Characters: Florizell (speaker), Perdita

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 4.4.47-49

Explanation and Analysis

Sixteen years have passed since act 3, making Perdita sixteen years old (ironically, the age at which the Shepherd, in the previous quote, wished "there were no age"). At a seasonal sheep-shearing festival, Florizell, the son of Polixenes, compliments Perdita on her beauty. The two are in love, but neither knows Perdita's true identity. Because she believes she is not a noblewoman (much less a princess), Perdita is nervous about Polixenes discovering their love. Florizell, however, does not care about social status. He urges his dearest Perdita to let go of her anxious thoughts, begging her not to darken "The mirth o' the feast." Here, the prince combines a call for levity and merriment with the assertion that he is comfortable with a social inversion, or with marrying someone low born.

●● PERDITA

The fairest flowers o' th' season
Are our carnations and streaked gillyvors,
Which some call nature's bastards. Of that kind
Our rustic garden's barren, and I care not
To get slips of them.

POLIXENES

Wherefore, gentle maiden,
Do you neglect them?

PERDITA

For I have heard it said
There is an art which in their piedness shares
With great creating nature.

POLIXENES

Say there be;
Yet nature is made better by no mean
But nature makes that mean. So, over that art
Which you say adds to nature is an art
That nature makes.
... This is an art
Which does mend nature, change it rather, but
The art itself is nature.

Related Characters: Perdita, Polixenes (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 4.4.95-114

Explanation and Analysis

Polixenes and Camillo have entered the feast in disguise, and now Perdita entertains and gives out flowers as the "mistress o' the feast." Perdita and Polixenes here discuss hybrid flowers known as "nature's bastards," an exchange that is humorous (and dark) since Perdita herself was banished since she was thought to be a bastard. Polixenes says that these flowers should not be neglected, and after a discussion of nature and art (he ultimately says that "art itself is nature"), he tells her not to call these flowers bastards.

Polixenes acceptance of the flowers and instruction not to call them bastards is ironic, since he will soon unknowingly reject Perdita, the supposed bastard (supposedly fathered by him) because he believes her to be a low-born daughter of a Shepherd.

●● POLIXENES

Mark your divorce, young sir,
Whom son I dare not call; thou art too base
To be acknowledged: thou a sceptre's heir,
That thus affect'st a sheep-hook! Thou old traitor,
I am sorry that by hanging thee I can
But shorten thy life one week. And thou, fresh piece
Of excellent witchcraft, who of force must know
The royal fool thou copest with, —

SHEPHERD

O, my heart!

POLIXENES

I'll have thy beauty scratch'd with briers, and made
More homely than thy state. For thee, fond boy,
If I may ever know thou dost but sigh
That thou no more shalt see this knack, as never
I mean thou shalt, we'll bar thee from succession;
Not hold thee of our blood, no, not our kin,
Far than Deucalion off: mark thou my words:
Follow us to the court. Thou churl, for this time,
Though full of our displeasure, yet we free thee
From the dead blow of it. And you, enchantment.—
Worthy enough a herdsman: yea, him too,
That makes himself, but for our honour therein,
Unworthy thee, —if ever henceforth thou
These rural latches to his entrance open,
Or hoop his body more with thy embraces,
I will devise a death as cruel for thee
As thou art tender to't.

Related Characters: Polixenes, Shepherd (speaker), Florizell, Perdita

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 4.4.490-518

Explanation and Analysis

Polixenes has discovered that his son plans to marry Perdita without his knowledge. Infuriated, he removes his disguise and tells his son to "mark" his divorce, indicating that he does not approve of (and is in fact disgusted by) the marriage. What's more, he refuses to refer to Florizell as his son, threatening to disown him and remove him as heir to the throne. In this angry speech Polixenes then threatens to hang the Shepherd and to have Perdita's face "scratch'd with briers."

We have seen many inversions take place in the shift from the first half of the play to the second. Now, it is Polixenes

who becomes excessively enraged with his child, threatens death, and abuses his power; Polixenes has replaced Leontes as the tyrant (though he does not here slip into the royal "we" as Leontes did when making his decrees, a possible indication that they will not be carried out, or are not as serious as the order to abandon Perdita, which we know did take place).

☛ Ha, ha! what a fool Honesty is! and Trust, his sworn brother, a very simple gentleman!

Related Characters: Autolycus (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4.4.711-712

Explanation and Analysis

These lines are spoken as a soliloquy by Autolycus. While it may appear from the beginning of his speech that he is going to offer a philosophical treatise on honesty and trust, Autolycus proceeds to enumerate the cheap items he sold during the festival. He brags about how much money he made selling junk, and also says that he has picked pockets and stolen from his customers. While the speech can be read in terms of the lack of trust that pervades the play, and the dishonesty and disbelief that have caused both the tragic and comedic outbursts from kings (one echoing the other), this speech also serves as simple comic relief, a classic feature of drama. While the others make plans to resolve the tension, the audience is given a humorous interlude by Autolycus.

Act 5, Scene 1 Quotes

☛ Your mother was most true to wedlock, prince;
For she did print your royal father off,
Conceiving you: were I but twenty-one,
Your father's image is so hit in you,
His very air, that I should call you brother,
As I did him, and speak of something wildly
By us perform'd before. Most dearly welcome!
And your fair princess, —goddess! —O, alas!
I lost a couple, that 'twixt heaven and earth
Might thus have stood begetting wonder as
You, gracious couple, do: and then I lost—
All mine own folly —the society,
Amity too, of your brave father, whom,
Though bearing misery, I desire my life
Once more to look on him.

Related Characters: Leontes (speaker), Polixenes, Florizell, Perdita

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 5.1.157-171

Explanation and Analysis

This scene returns to Sicilia, and shows Leontes repenting still for his errors that led to Hermione's death. He contemplates remarrying, but says that he will never do it. A servant announces that Florizell has come with his princess unannounced; Paulina remarks that it is shame that Mamillius is not alive, since he would have been the same age as Florizell now. The lines here are Leontes' greeting to the young Bohemian prince.

He begins by saying that Florizell's mother was surely true to wedlock, immediately referencing his own error and accusation of Hermione (either by accident or design). He affirms Florizell's parentage by saying that the young prince is a "print" of his father, and that if he (Leontes) were young, he would call the prince "brother" and think he was Polixenes himself.

Leontes then greets the princess and calls her a goddess. Unknowing of either her true or false lineage, Leontes is pleased with the pair. He then returns to repenting his own folly and all that he has lost, and tells Florizell that he hopes to make amends with Polixenes someday. Here we see that time has made Leontes more wise, reserved, calm, and repentant.

Act 5, Scene 3 Quotes

☛ LEONTES
But yet, Paulina,
Hermione was not so much wrinkled, nothing
So aged as this seems.

POLIXENES
O, not by much!

PAULINA
So much the more our carver's excellence,
Which lets go by some sixteen years and makes her
As she lived now.

Related Characters: Paulina, Leontes, Polixenes (speaker), Hermione

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 5.3.31-37

Explanation and Analysis

Most of the play's tension has been resolved, with the reunion and reconciliation of Leontes and Perdita and Leontes and Polixenes taking place off stage in Act 5, Scene 2. Now, the whole group gathers to look at an incredibly lifelike statue of Hermione. Here, Leontes remarks that the statue seems more wrinkled and aged than Hermione ever was. Kind Polixenes jumps in quickly with a remark that she doesn't look aged by much. But Paulina reassures them that the artist has masterfully carved the statue to represent Hermione as she would have looked if she had lived the past 16 years.

This statue needs to be aged properly, of course, since it will soon come to life! In this crucial scene it is unclear whether Paulina brings the statue to life by a spell, introducing the miraculous or supernatural into the play (which is fitting given the absurdity found elsewhere), or if Hermione has been alive all along, waiting to return only when Leontes has fully repented and absolved himself, and is simply pretending to be a statue during this scene.

☝ My lord, your sorrow was too sore laid on,
Which sixteen winters cannot blow away,
So many summers dry; scarce any joy
Did ever so long live; no sorrow
But kill'd itself much sooner.

Related Characters: Camillo (speaker), Leontes

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 5.3.57-62

Explanation and Analysis

The statue is so lifelike (or maybe is just Hermione herself) that Leontes becomes overwhelmed with regret and sorrow and begins weeping. Camillo, along with Polixenes, tries to calm him down and assure him that he has grieved enough and showed enough sorrow for his loss. Connecting back to the seasons, Camillo says that Leontes' sorrow was more than adequate, and that sixteen winters could not disrupt it, nor could the summers dry it. He asserts that no joy or

sorrow has ever lasted as long as this grief.

The juxtaposition in these lines of summer and winter, grief and joy, reminds us of some of the lingering tragic elements in the comedic second half of the play, and ground the *Winter's Tale* firmly as a "problem play." Though the second act is comedic and set during a summer, we know that winters have passed and will also follow. There is much joy in the ending of the play, but Mamillius and Antigonus both remain dead.

☝ Go together,
You precious winners all; your exultation
Partake to every one. I, an old turtle,
Will wing me to some wither'd bough and there
My mate, that's never to be found again,
Lament till I am lost.

Related Characters: Paulina (speaker), Antigonus

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5.3.164-169

Explanation and Analysis

With nearly everyone reunited, Paulina suggests that everyone should go together and enjoy the bounty they have won and the happy ending they have found. Paulina, though, has just been informed of her husband's death. So while she encourages merriment in others, she, "an old turtle," will find a quiet place to spend the rest of her life lamenting her lost love and losing herself. One of the reasons this play is problematic (though some comedies have sour notes in their endings) is that in a scene that should only be filled with marriage, happiness, and loose ends tied up, we also see a reflection on death, loneliness, and a loss of the self in lamentation and sorrow.

☝ O, peace, Paulina!
Thou shouldst a husband take by my consent,
As I by thine a wife: this is a match,
And made between's by vows. Thou hast found mine;
But how, is to be question'd; for I saw her,
As I thought, dead, and have in vain said many
A prayer upon her grave. I'll not seek far—
For him, I partly know his mind—to find thee
An honourable husband. Come, Camillo
And take her by the hand, whose worth and honesty
Is richly noted and here justified
By us, a pair of kings.

Related Characters: Leontes (speaker), Hermione, Paulina, Camillo

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 5.3.170-182

Explanation and Analysis

These are almost the last lines of the play. Paulina has made her dark reflection on her loss and consigned to lose herself in sorrow, but Leontes' joy at reuniting with his daughter and wife (despite his son still being dead) is enough to give a final push towards happiness and comedy. As king, he grants Paulina his permission to take a new husband, saying he

wants to repay her for finding his wife again. He doesn't need to look far to find her a husband, suggesting she wed Camillo, "an honorable husband" whose "worth and honesty is richly noted" by the pair of kings, Polixenes and Leontes.

The play concludes with Leontes asking for forgiveness, and with the union of Polixenes' and Leontes' bloodlines through the marriage of Florizell and Perdita. The natural order is restored and even augmented by this new marriage. The friendships are repaired, and honesty is reaffirmed. Despite its strange, problematic beginning and some of its absurdities, the play ends on a classically light, comedic note.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

Archidamus is a nobleman from Bohemia visiting Sicilia along with his king Polixenes. He speaks to a Sicilian nobleman named Camillo about how hospitable the Sicilians have been to him. Camillo tells him that the king of Sicilia, Leontes, plans to visit Bohemia soon, and Archidamus says that the Bohemians will need to give the Sicilians “sleepy drinks,” so they don’t notice how insufficiently Bohemian hospitality matches up to that of Sicilia.

Camillo says that Polixenes and Leontes have been close friends since childhood, and Archidamus agrees that “there is not in the world either malice or matter to alter,” their friendship. Archidamus compliments Leontes’ son, the prince Mamillius, and Camillo says that the prince is so dear to the citizens of Sicilia that old men “on crutches” hope to keep living only so they can see Mamillius grow up and become a man.

The friendship between Leontes and Polixenes translates into a close alliance between their two kingdoms and their citizens, such as Camillo and Archidamus.



Polixenes and Leontes have a strong friendship, but one that will be put to the test by the events to follow. The description of Mamillius emphasizes the importance of youth, which is highly valued by the characters in the play. Even simply seeing the young boy is enjoyable for older Sicilian citizens.



ACT 1, SCENE 2

At Leontes’ court, Polixenes tells him that he must be getting back to Bohemia, as he has been in Sicilia for nine months. He thanks Leontes for his hospitality, and Leontes asks him to stay longer. Polixenes insists, “my affairs / Do even drag me homeward,” and Leontes tells his pregnant wife Hermione to persuade Polixenes to stay.

Hermione takes Polixenes aside and tries to persuade him to stay in Sicilia, but he keeps declining. She jokes that if he doesn’t agree to stay, she will have to keep him in Sicilia as a prisoner. Polixenes finally agrees to extend his stay. Hermione asks him about his childhood friendship with her husband Leontes, and Polixenes says they “were as twinned lambs that did frisk i’ th’ sun,” and were so innocent as small children they seemed even free from original sin. But, Polixenes says, they grew older, lost their innocence, and fell in love with their respective wives.

At this early stage in the play, all of the characters’ various relationships are functioning well: Polixenes is friendly with both Leontes and Hermione. These friendships don’t (yet) threaten the marital relationship between Hermione and Leontes.



Polixenes is stubborn at first, but Hermione is able to persuade him simply through perseverance. Polixenes’ description of Leontes and himself emphasizes both their close-knit friendship and the pure innocence of youth. He goes as far as to contradict Christian doctrine, saying that they were so innocent as children that it was as if they were not even guilty of original sin.



Leontes asks if Hermione has persuaded Polixenes to stay, and she says she has. Leontes marvels that she convinced Polixenes when he could not, and tells her, “thou never spok’st / To better purpose,” except when she pledged her love for him. Hermione and Polixenes hold hands briefly, and Leontes suddenly becomes upset. Turning aside and speaking to himself, he says that Polixenes and his wife appear too familiar, as if there is something romantic between them. He turns to Mamillius and asks if he is really the boy’s father.

Leontes is impressed with Hermione’s powers of persuasion, but also suspicious. In his eyes, the line between fond friendship and romantic affair is beginning to blur, with Hermione and Polixenes holding hands. He jumps remarkably quickly from a slight suspicion to certainty of Hermione’s guilt. His quick assumption of her betraying him is, ironically, an example of his betraying her.



Leontes doubts that he is Mamillius’ father, and is greatly troubled. Hermione and Polixenes ask him why he is upset, and he answers that he is fine, and that his son simply reminded him of himself when he was a young boy. He asks Polixenes if he is as fond of his son as Leontes is of Mamillius, and Polixenes answers that his son is “all my exercise, my mirth, my matter.”

Leontes is now suddenly convinced of Hermione’s infidelity. The strong paternal bond that Leontes and Polixenes describe is threatened by the possibility of Mamillius being an illegitimate child, a son from the wrong father.



Leontes tells Hermione to treat Polixenes well as a guest, and Hermione and Polixenes go off to a garden. Leontes is convinced that his wife is having an affair with Polixenes and laments that he is now a cuckold. He says that there are many men who don’t realize that their wives are unfaithful. He calls for Camillo, and sends Mamillius away.

Convinced of his wife’s dishonesty, Leontes himself behaves somewhat dishonestly, disguising his suspicions and pretending that everything is okay. Based on the (faulty) evidence of his wife’s infidelity, he generalizes in a sexist manner about women’s propensity for cheating.



Leontes thinks that everyone in his court knows about his wife’s infidelity, and asks Camillo if he saw how Polixenes was only persuaded to stay by Hermione. He asks Camillo why Polixenes agreed to stay in Sicilia, but Camillo doesn’t take Leontes’ hint. Leontes says that Camillo must be dishonest, or too cowardly to tell him the truth, or a negligent servant, or a fool. Camillo is confused and asks Leontes to clarify what he’s talking about. Leontes says that his wife is “slippery” and unfaithful to him. Camillo cannot believe this.

Despite only limited evidence, Leontes is now firm in his (paranoid) belief of Hermione’s unfaithfulness. Again, the speed with which he comes to the conclusion of his wife’s betrayal can somewhat ironically be seen as his betraying her and indicative of the way that suspicion can overwhelm a person and become impossible to shake or shrug off.



Leontes says that Polixenes and Hermione whisper together, lean “cheek to cheek,” and touch their noses together. They play together, “horsing foot on foot,” and “skulking in corners.” He sees all this as definitive proof of their affair. Camillo still doesn’t believe it, and tells Leontes to “be cured / Of this diseased opinion.” Leontes tells Camillo, “you lie, you lie,” thinking that his servant is keeping the truth from him.

Leontes interprets all the signs of Polixenes’ and Hermione’s affectionate friendship as evidence of a romantic affair. Camillo is caught between his loyalty to his queen, who he doesn’t want to think of as guilty, and his king, who he doesn’t want to contradict for fear of his loyalty, job, and safety.



Leontes asks Camillo to poison Polixenes. Camillo says he is willing to do this, but still refuses to believe that Hermione has been unfaithful to Leontes. Leontes angrily says that he would not tell Camillo she was unfaithful if he did not really believe it, as Hermione's infidelity would cast doubt on whether he is really Mamillius' father. Camillo agrees to kill Polixenes, but asks Leontes not to tell Hermione what he suspects and to act as though nothing is wrong between them, so as to prevent any rumors about her infidelity from spreading. Leontes agrees.

Leontes leaves, and Camillo examines his difficult position: if he is to obey his king, he "must be the poisoner / Of good Polixenes." Thinking that no one who has murdered a king has ever "flourished after," he decides that he must not obey Leontes. Polixenes enters and asks Camillo why Leontes seems so upset. Camillo says that he doesn't know, but Polixenes continues to press him about the matter.

Camillo says that there is a "sickness" that has originated in Polixenes himself. Polixenes is confused, but Camillo says he cannot be more specific. Polixenes asks him to explain, and Camillo finally breaks down and says that he has been ordered to kill Polixenes, because Leontes is convinced that he has "touched his queen / Forbiddenly." Polixenes is shocked and wishes that his blood would turn "to an infected jelly," if this were true and that his name would be ranked alongside Judas for betrayal.

Camillo says that there is no oath Polixenes can make that will convince Leontes that he has not had an affair with Hermione. He asks Camillo where Leontes' suspicion has come from, but Camillo doesn't know. He advises Polixenes to flee Sicilia and says he will serve him instead of Leontes now. He promises that he is telling the truth and that Polixenes is really in danger.

Polixenes says he believes Camillo, because he saw Leontes' contempt for him in his expression. He says that because Hermione is such a "precious creature," Leontes' jealousy will be great. He says that he is afraid for his safety, and he and Camillo leave, preparing to get out of Sicilia.

Camillo continues to face a dilemma of loyalties: he must choose between his allegiance to Leontes and Hermione, as well as between his allegiance to Leontes and his knowledge that Polixenes is likely an innocent man. In response to Hermione's supposed dishonesty, Leontes plans to be dishonest himself, hiding his suspicion from Polixenes and Hermione.



Camillo finally decides that he must disobey his own king in order not to commit the worse crime of murdering Polixenes. He is still trying to be loyal to Leontes, though, as he at first refuses to tell Polixenes what is going on.



Polixenes is shocked that his close friend Leontes could suspect him of having an affair with Hermione. This would go against not only his friendship with both Hermione and Leontes, but also his personal sense of honesty. Camillo has "betrayed" Leontes to some degree by telling Polixenes about his suspicions, but this "betrayal" may be justified, as it protects the innocent Polixenes.



Leontes is so committed to his belief that Hermione is unfaithful that no evidence or oaths can persuade him otherwise. Polixenes' only choice is thus to flee Sicilia, effectively severing the close friendship that, not so long ago, seemed unbreakable.



Polixenes trusts in Camillo's honesty, seeing Leontes' expression as proof of his contempt. Camillo is now behaving loyally toward Polixenes, having been forced to betray the irrational Leontes.



ACT 2, SCENE 1

Hermione gives Mamillius to two attendant ladies to watch over him. The ladies comment on how large the pregnant Hermione has gotten, and say that they eagerly await “a fine new prince.” Hermione asks Mamillius to tell her a “merry” tale, but Mamillius says, “a sad tale’s best for **winter**,” and plans to tell her a frightening story with “sprites and goblins.” He starts to tell his story, when Leontes and a nobleman named Antigonus enter.

Leontes is looking for Camillo and Polixenes, but one of his lords informs him that the two have both fled Sicilia. Leontes takes this as confirmation of Polixenes’ guilt. He compares the pain of being cheated on to drinking from a cup with a poisonous spider in it, saying that one is safe so long as one does not know about the poisonous spider, but that in this case he is aware of the poison. He says that Camillo has betrayed him, as well

Leontes sends Mamillius away and tells Hermione that she is likely pregnant with Polixenes’ child. Hermione denies this, but Leontes does not believe her. He guesses that the guards and lords around him know about Hermione’s affair and imagines that they cannot call Hermione an honest lady without “shrugs, these ‘hum’s and ‘ha’s.” Hermione insists that her husband is mistaken, but Leontes will not be convinced by her.

Leontes calls Hermione an adulteress and “a bed-swarver.” Hermione denies it and says that he will be grieved when he realizes that he has made false accusations against his own wife. Leontes orders for Hermione to be thrown in prison. Hermione tells the lords around her that she is “not prone to weeping, as our sex / Commonly are,” and will endure prison until “the heavens look / With an aspect more favorable.” She tells everyone not to cry, and to save their tears for when she has actually done something wrong.

Hermione and her ladies are led off to prison. Antigonus begs Leontes to reconsider, as he is harming Hermione, Mamillius, and himself by doubting his wife’s honor. Antigonus and another noble lord say that they are sure Hermione has been faithful. Antigonus says that if Hermione can’t be trusted, then no woman can. He says that Hermione turns out to really be “honor-flawed,” he will “geld” (i.e. spay) his three daughters so that they cannot produce illegitimate children.

The innocent young child Mamillius delights his mother. The discussion of what kind of tale is appropriate for winter relates the play’s own sense of propriety in terms of genre: in this first half of the play (set in winter), it is most like a serious tragedy. But in act 4, when it is spring, the play will move toward a “merry” comedy.



Leontes is so stubborn in his false belief regarding Hermione, that he interprets everything as more proof of her infidelity. He laments how he has been betrayed and calls Camillo disloyal, when Camillo has actually behaved in an upright, honest way by helping the innocent Polixenes.



Given the importance of innocent, young children in the play, the idea that Hermione is pregnant with an illegitimate child makes her supposed betrayal of Leontes even worse. Leontes is convinced of Hermione’s infidelity and his paranoia extends to thinking that everyone in his court knows about it and is laughing at him.



Leontes stubbornly thinks that he is carrying out justice by punishing Hermione, when he is actually betraying her (by not trusting her) and behaving in an unjust way. Hermione bravely moderates her response to this serious injustice, refusing to cry.



Again, Leontes thinks that he is carrying out justice by putting his wife in prison, though he is actually behaving as an unjust tyrant. He is also betraying his wife and son, both of whom he is harming. Antigonus tries to persuade Leontes that Hermione would be the last woman ever to cheat on her husband, but Leontes remains firm in his false belief.



Leontes discounts the worries of Antigonus and the other nobleman, and remains sure of Hermione's infidelity. He sees Camillo's flight from Sicilia as more proof of the affair. He says that he has sent someone to the island of Delphos, though, to get an oracle from Apollo for "greater confirmation" of what has happened.

Leontes cannot be persuaded to change his mind. Nonetheless, he has sent for an oracle to be certain. The oracle represents an absolute authority that should be able to persuade anyone of the truth.



Leontes says that he is already sure that his wife cheated on him, but the oracle's word will "give rest to th' minds of others," who don't believe that Hermione has been unfaithful. He says that he has imprisoned his own wife so that she doesn't run away like Polixenes. As Leontes leaves, Antigonus comments to himself that the "good truth" of the matter would actually provoke the king to laughter.

Leontes is certain of his beliefs, but wants to be just and assure his citizens of what he already thinks true with the oracle. Antigonus' comment suggests both that all this is a misunderstanding, and that the truth of the matter should be cause not for tragic seriousness, but for comic levity.



ACT 2, SCENE 2

Paulina, a noblewoman and the wife of Antigonus, tries to visit Hermione in jail, but the jailer guarding the prison will not let her in to see the queen. One of Hermione's attendants, Emilia, comes to speak with Paulina and informs her that Hermione has given birth to a daughter. According to Emilia, Hermione takes comfort in her new child and tells the baby, "My poor prisoner, / I am innocent as you."

Paulina tries to visit and help Hermione out of loyalty to her queen and duty toward her friend. The newborn child, as young as a child can be, represents the pinnacle of innocence, giving Hermione's assertion serious force.



Paulina laments Leontes' madness in throwing his pregnant wife in jail. She asks Emilia if she could bring the infant to Leontes, in the hopes that the sight of his new daughter might "soften" him, as "the silence often of pure innocence / Persuades when speaking fails." Paulina assures Emilia that she will do her best to persuade Leontes to free Hermione, and Emilia goes to tell this plan to the queen.

Paulina hopes that Leontes will be persuaded by the sight of his own child, evidence of Hermione's fidelity and a reminder of what he should love and treasure, since he cannot be persuaded by words. The unjustly imprisoned Hermione cannot even come to speak with Paulina, who has to communicate with her via Emilia.



The jailer tells Paulina that he is not sure if he can allow the newborn child to leave the prison. Paulina tells him that the child was "prisoner to the womb" of its mother but is now free and innocent of any crime. The jailer is persuaded and agrees to let the child go with Paulina.

The jailer faces a dilemma involving his loyalty to the king's orders and the absolute innocence of the newborn child. Paulina successfully persuades the jailer by emphasizing the child's youthful innocence.



ACT 2, SCENE 3

Alone, Leontes says that he can find no rest "nor night nor day." He says that it is a sign of weakness to be so affected by his wife's crime, and wonders if he could find some peace if his wife were "given to the fire," and burned to death as punishment. A servant enters and informs Leontes that Mamillius, who has been ill, is improving. Leontes says that the news of Hermione's "dishonor" made Mamillius sick so that he "threw off his spirit, his appetite, his sleep, / And downright languished."

Leontes ponders what the just punishment for his supposedly guilty wife is. Hermione's apparent infidelity is compared to a kind of sickness, as if her dishonor could infect Mamillius. Ironically, though, it is Leontes' own overhasty presumption of his wife's guilt and stubborn cruelty that seems to be afflicting his court like a harmful sickness.



Leontes thinks that Camillo and Polixenes are probably laughing at him from afar, but he tells himself not to think of them, and to take his revenge out on Hermione instead. Paulina arrives with the newborn child. Antigonus and a servant try to prevent her from going to see Leontes, but she tells them that she brings news that will make Leontes feel better.

Leontes is as distraught over his friends' imagined betrayal of him as he is over his wife's supposed infidelity. He thinks that he is justified in taking revenge on Hermione, when he is actually behaving rather tyrannically.



Leontes hears Paulina talking and asks Antigonus if he cannot "rule her," as he has ordered for no one to come disturb him. Paulina tells Leontes that she comes from his "good queen," and shows him Hermione's newborn daughter. Leontes is furious and orders for Paulina to be taken away. He calls the baby a bastard and tells Paulina to take it away.

Leontes extends his assumption of his wife's guilt to a general sexist belief that women need to be "ruled" by their husbands. Not even the sight of his innocent newborn daughter can persuade Leontes to change his stubborn mind, as sight of the baby just reminds him of the infidelity he is certain his wife engaged in.



Leontes refers to his wife as a traitor, and Paulina says that the only traitor is the king himself, who slanders both his wife and his children. Leontes says that the baby is Polixenes' child, and says that it should be thrown into the fire along with Hermione. Paulina insists that the baby resembles Leontes and must be his child. Leontes responds that Antigonus should be hanged for not being able to stop Paulina from talking, and Antigonus says no husband can stop his wife from speaking her mind.

In Leontes' mind, the child is out of its place, here with the wrong father, and is an unjust violation of the natural order of his and Hermione's family. His suspicions have driven him to cruel, unjust behavior, as he speaks of murdering his own newborn child. Paulina understands the irony that Leontes, so paranoid about betrayal, is the only one actually behaving as a traitor.



Paulina calls Leontes a tyrant and he again demands that Antigonus take his wife away. Paulina says there's no need for her to be dragged away, and leaves of her own accord. Before going, she once again tells Leontes that the infant is clearly his child. After she leaves, Leontes calls Antigonus a traitor and says he has made his wife attempt to persuade him. He orders Antigonus to take the baby away immediately and burn it in a fire, or else Antigonus himself will be killed.

Paulina is the only Sicilian brave enough (and loyal enough to Hermione) to speak out against Leontes' unjust, tyrannical behavior. She tries to reason with him, seeing the child's resemblance to Leontes as proof of its legitimate father. Leontes forces Antigonus to choose between disobeying his own king or killing an innocent child, who has done nothing wrong.



Antigonus promises that he did not arrange for his wife to come to Leontes, and some other attendant lords vouch for him. Leontes calls them all liars. One of the lords insists that they are loyal and begs the king to reconsider killing the baby. Leontes says he does not want the bastard child to grow up and falsely call him father. He asks Antigonus what he will do to save the baby's life, and Antigonus vows that he will do whatever is in his ability to prevent the child's death.

Leontes' paranoia about betrayal extends now from his wife Hermione and friend Polixenes to his entire court, whom he calls liars. For Leontes, it would be unjust for his illegitimate daughter to grow up under the wrong father. Leontes takes advantage of Antigonus' loyalty in making him vow to do whatever he orders.



Leontes orders Antigonus to take the baby away and abandon it in "some remote and desert place," where "chance may nurse or end it." He threatens to kill Antigonus, and Paulina, if he does not do this. Reluctantly obeying his king, Antigonus carries the baby off and prays that wild creatures may take pity on the child and let it live.

Operating under the delusion that he is carrying out justice, Leontes continues to behave like an unjust tyrant. Similar to Camillo earlier, Antigonus faces a dilemma between loyalty and virtue, as he is ordered to abandon a completely innocent child.



After Antigonus leaves with the child, a servant enters and announces that the men Leontes sent to Delphos have returned. Leontes comments on how quickly they have journeyed to the oracle and back, and says that the truth will soon be known. He orders for Hermione to be brought out of prison to a “session,” where she will have “a just and open trial.” He says that his heart “will be a burden,” so long as his unfaithful wife lives.

The oracle again functions as a sign of absolute truth and authority. By consulting the oracle and having an open trial, Leontes insists that he is behaving justly. He claims that his heart hurts because of the infidelity of his beloved wife, but it is he himself who is betraying and hurting a loved one.



ACT 3, SCENE 1

Cleomenes and Dion, the two men sent to Delphos by Leontes, arrive at a sea-port in Sicilia. They both remark on how beautiful the island of Delphos was and “how ceremonious, solemn and unearthly” was the offering to Apollo they made there for a prophecy. They are carrying the written oracle “seal’d up” and both hope that when it is read it will be good for the queen Hermione.

Cleomenes and Dion must balance their loyalty and duty toward the king and queen. They are obeying Leontes in journeying to Delphos for the oracle, but still hold out hope for Hermione’s innocence. The “seal’d up” oracle they carry should be the ultimate piece of evidence in Hermione’s trial.



ACT 3, SCENE 2

At a court of justice, Leontes calls for Hermione to enter and be put on trial. He says that he is not being “tyrannous,” because he is giving Hermione an open trial. Hermione is brought forth, and an officer reads out her indictment, which accuses her of committing adultery, as well as conspiring with Camillo in “high treason,” against Leontes.

Leontes gives the appearance of justice by holding a trial for Hermione. The indictment accuses Hermione of betraying Leontes’ love as his wife and also of betraying him as his subject, by conspiring in treason with Camillo.



Hermione says that she is innocent, but doubts that anything she says can convince Leontes. She says that Leontes should know that up until this point she was “as continent, as chaste, as true, / As I am now unhappy.” She says that she is not speaking to save her own life, but rather her honor. She insists on her innocence, but Leontes refuses to believe her.

Hermione presents her past loyal behavior as evidence of her character and virtue, even though she knows her husband is too lost and stubborn in his false beliefs and assumptions to be persuaded by her testimony. His lack of faith in Hermione is the real betrayal here.



Hermione says she loved Polixenes “with such a kind of love as might become / A lady like me,” but not in a romantic way. She says that Camillo was an honest man and she doesn’t know why he left Sicilia. Leontes accuses Hermione of knowing about Camillo’s plan to leave Sicilia ahead of time, and says that she also “had a bastard by Polixenes.” He says she deserves death.

Hermione distinguishes between the romantic love she has for her husband and the friendly love she had for Polixenes. Leontes’ suspicions arise from his inability to distinguish these. He accuses Hermione of more and more betrayals, and thinks that the only just punishment for her is death.



Hermione says that she does not fear death, as her life has become a series of dishonorable humiliations and her reputation has been ruined, as she is “on every post / Proclaimed a strumpet.” Hermione says that the oracle will settle this matter and says, “Apollo be my judge!” Cleomenes and Dion are brought in, and they swear that they have brought a sealed oracle from Delphos and have not tampered with it. An officer reads the oracle out loud, which says that Hermione is chaste, Polixenes is innocent, Camillo is “a true subject,” and Leontes is “a jealous tyrant.” It also says that Leontes will live without an heir “if that / which is lost be not found.

Leontes immediately discounts the oracle, saying, “There is no truth at all i’ the oracle.” Suddenly, a servant enters and announces that Mamillius, sick with worry for his mother, has died. Leontes says that Apollo must be punishing him for disregarding the oracle. Hermione faints, and Leontes calls for her to be carried off so she can recover. Paulina takes her away, worrying that she is dying. Leontes begs Apollo for pardon, and admits that he has been wrong. He pledges to “new woo” Hermione and recall Camillo to Sicilia. He admits that he has been jealous and wrong, and that Camillo is an honorable, good man.

Paulina re-enters and announces that Hermione has died. She berates Leontes, calling him a tyrant, and enumerating all the evil things he has done, betraying Polixenes, Hermione, and his newborn daughter. She says that Leontes has done more wrongs than he can repent for. Leontes agrees and says to her, “thou canst not speak too much; I have deserved / All tongues to talk their bitterest.”

A nobleman rebukes Paulina for speaking too boldly to the king, and Paulina says she has “show’d too much / The rashness of a woman.” Leontes tells her that she spoke truly, though. He calls for the bodies of Mamillius and Hermione to be brought to him, planning to bury them together and visit their burial place every day to weep.

ACT 3, SCENE 3

Antigonus and a mariner land on the coast in Bohemia. Antigonus goes ashore, carrying Leontes’ newborn daughter. He says that a vision of Hermione appeared to him in his sleep and told her to bring the child to Bohemia and to call the child Perdita (Latin for “she who has been lost”). Pitying the poor child, Antigonus leaves Perdita in the wilderness, as a powerful storm begins. He is chased off-stage by a bear.

Knowing that she cannot persuade her husband, Hermione appeals to Apollo as an ultimate judge of truth. The oracle proclaims the truth, and exposes the unjust tyranny of Leontes, who has himself betrayed his friend Polixenes, his subject Camillo, and his wife Hermione (rather than the other way around). The oracle further reveals the impact of Leontes' rampant suspicions: the loss of his family and his legacy.



Leontes' commitment to false beliefs is remarkable: not even the divinely inspired oracle can persuade him. However, once Mamillius dies, and Hermione appears to be dying, his love for his wife and son takes over and he realizes the error of his ways. This kind of sudden reversal and realization is characteristic of tragedies, and underscores the grim seriousness of this first part of the play, filled with high emotions and death.



Paulina again speaks out against her king, out of loyalty both to the truth and to her late queen and friend Hermione. Like a tragic hero, Leontes now suffers the pain and suffering brought about by his own misguided behavior.



The nobleman chides Paulina for disregarding the loyalty she should show to her king. Leontes plans to spend the rest of his life in lamentation, signaling the pervasive sadness and seriousness of this part of the play.



Perdita's exile from her homeland and family is a major disruption of the natural order of things, one that will need to be resolved if the play is to end happily. Antigonus' death is a strange mixture of seriousness and abrupt, slapstick violence. It is unclear what reaction (other than surprise and confusion) the audience should have to it, or whether there is some moral associated with it.



A shepherd enters, complaining about youths between the age of 16 and 23, saying that young men of those ages are only trouble. Two such young men have just scared off some of his sheep, which he is now looking for. The shepherd sees Perdita on the ground, and decides to “take it up for / pity.” The shepherd’s son enters and tells the shepherd that he has seen two remarkable sights: a ship wrecked in the storm at sea, and a nobleman on land who was attacked by a bear. The man cried out for help and said his name was Antigonus.

The shepherd remarks on the unfortunate fate of Antigonus, but draws his son’s attention to the child he has found, and some gold that was left with the child. The shepherd says that they should keep the newfound gold a secret and bring the child home. His son agrees and goes to see “if the bear be gone from the gentleman and how much / he hath eaten,” in case there are any remains of Antigonus left to bury.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

The allegorical figure of Father Time comes on stage, and addresses the audience. He tells the audience not to be distressed that he is now jumping sixteen years into the future. He says that Leontes grieves “the effects of his fond jealousies” and “shuts up himself.” He says that king Polixenes in Bohemia has a son named Florizell, and also tells the audience that Perdita has grown up as the shepherd’s daughter in Bohemia.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

At Polixenes’ palace in Bohemia, Camillo begs Polixenes to let him return to his homeland of Sicilia, since Leontes is “penitent” and has begged Camillo to return. Polixenes asks him not to go to Sicilia, still holding a grudge against Leontes and refusing to forgive him for causing the death of Hermione and Mamillius.

Polixenes asks Camillo if he has seen Florizell recently, who has recently been spending much of his time at a shepherd’s cottage. He says that he worries about what is drawing Florizell to the shepherd’s home, and asks Camillo to accompany him in disguise to visit the shepherd and learn what is going on with Florizell. Camillo agrees, and they leave to find disguises.

The shepherd’s complaint echoes the pervasive sentiment in the play that young children are innocent, and that aging involves a kind of fall from grace or loss of innocence. Perdita’s place in the social hierarchy has been turned upside down: she should be a princess, but is now adopted by a lowly shepherd.



Just as A Winter’s Tale play mixes sorrow and pleasure, tragedy and comedy, this eventful day holds both good fortune (the shepherd’s finding Perdita and the gold) and bad (Antigonus dying), both death and rebirth, as Perdita is in a sense born again as the shepherd’s daughter.



Both the allegorical Father Time character and the sixteen-year flash forward are remarkable, uncommon features for a Shakespearian play. They hint at the importance of the theme of time and aging in the play, and the play’s movement forward in time allows us to see how the characters change with age.



Now that Leontes has realized his mistake, Camillo wants to return to his rightful place in Sicilia. Polixenes refuses to forgive his former friend, though, and asks Camillo to remain loyal to him and stay in Bohemia.



Polixenes worries about his son, who is a prince, spending so much time outside of his natural place, at the cottage of a lowly shepherd. Camillo loyally agrees to help carry out Polixenes’ plan.



ACT 4, SCENE 3

A con-man named Autolycus is walking along a road in Bohemia, singing a song about **spring** and how he enjoys “tumbling in the hay,” with women. He sees the shepherd’s son approaching and cries out, “A prize! A prize!” The shepherd’s son is counting his money and checking his list of things to buy for an upcoming sheep-shearing feast. He does not notice Autolycus.

Lying on the ground, Autolycus shouts that he is hurting. The shepherd’s son goes to help him, and he says that he has been attacked and robbed. The shepherd’s son helps Autolycus up, who says that someone named Autolycus mugged him. The shepherd’s son says he knows of Autolycus, and calls him a “prig” and a “cowardly rogue.” Autolycus thanks the shepherd’s son for his help, and they part ways. Autolycus, though, has stolen the shepherd’s son’s purse. He exits, singing happily, and planning to rob more people at the sheep-shearing festival.

Along with the arrival of spring, Autolycus signals a shift in the play from the serious, grave matters that happened in Sicilia earlier to more light-hearted events in the Bohemian countryside.



The repeatedly dishonest trickster Autolycus forms a counterpoint to the strong examples of honest, loyal characters we have seen with Paulina, Antigonus, and Camillo. The humorous irony of Autolycus saying that he robbed himself, in order to rob the shepherd’s son, is an example of the light comedy of this part of the play.



ACT 4, SCENE 4

At the sheep-shearing festival, Florizell (dressed up as a shepherd named “Doricles” for the festival) compliments Perdita on her beauty. She worries about what will happen if king Polixenes should find them together, since she is only a lowly shepherd’s daughter. Florizell says that he doesn’t care about her social status, but Perdita says that Polixenes will surely oppose any union between them. Florizell tells her not to worry and to enjoy the festival.

A group of shepherds (including the shepherd who found Perdita when she was a baby, and his son) enter, along with Polixenes and Camillo in disguises. The shepherd tells Perdita to fulfill her duties as “mistress o’ the feast” and welcome everyone. Perdita distributes some flowers to the guests and talks with Polixenes about hybrid flowers made by grafting two different plants together. She describes such flowers as “nature’s bastards,” but Polixenes says that even they are made by nature and tells her not to call them “bastards.”

Perdita continues to give out flowers and garlands to all the guests, describing each particular kind of plant. Florizell compliments her beauty again, as well as her speaking, singing, and dancing. Continuing to flirt with her, he asks her to dance. Polixenes mentions to Camillo that Perdita seems noble in her behavior, as if she were more than just a shepherd’s daughter. Music begins, and all the shepherds and shepherdesses begin to dance.

Florizell and Perdita’s relationship mixes up different levels of society. He is a prince, while she is merely a shepherd’s daughter (though we as the audience know she is actually a princess). Florizell encourages Perdita not to worry about serious matters and to enjoy herself, signaling to the audience that the play is becoming more comedic than tragic.



All the disguises and mixed-up social roles of the festival (with the king Polixenes disguised as a normal citizen, for example) reflect how the world of the play is out of order, with Camillo and Perdita in the wrong land and Perdita in the wrong family (and social class). The discussion about the flowers has ironic resonance for Perdita, who was sent away from her own home because Leontes thought she herself was an illegitimate bastard child.



The light-hearted festival is full of song and dance. Perdita and Florizell’s budding relationship exemplifies innocent, young love, free from the jealousy that tore Leontes and Hermione apart. Polixenes notes Perdita’s noble behavior, as if she can’t help but naturally act like the royal noblewoman she really is.



Polixenes speaks to the shepherd who has adopted Perdita, and learns that Perdita and the young man dressed up as “Doricles” are in love. A servant enters and announces that a “peddler” has come to play songs and ballads and sell small trinkets. The shepherd’s son calls for the peddler to come sing, and Autolycus enters. He sings about the various wares he is selling, encouraging everyone, “Come buy of me, come. Come buy, come buy. / Buy, lads, or else your lasses cry. / Come buy.”

The shepherd’s son buys a shepherdess named Mopsa some ribbons from Autolycus. Mopsa asks him to buy her some more things, but he reminds her that he was robbed recently. Autolycus acts sympathetic and tells the shepherd’s son that it pays to be careful. Autolycus, the shepherd’s son, Mopsa, and some others discuss what ballad they should sing. They decide on a song called “Two Maids Wooing a Man,” and sing it together.

Another group of herdsmen enters and performs a dance. The disguised Polixenes approaches Florizell and asks him about Perdita. Florizell says that he is in love with Perdita, and describes her beauty at length. Perdita avows her love for Florizell, and the shepherd agrees to give her away in marriage to him. Just as the shepherd is set to join Florizell’s and Perdita’s hands (symbolizing their engagement), Polixenes stops Florizell and asks him if his father is aware of this.

Florizell says he doesn’t plan to tell his father, and Polixenes says that he is wronging his father by marrying without his knowledge or consent. He encourages Florizell to tell his father about Perdita, but Florizell refuses. Polixenes suddenly removes his disguise, angrily says that Florizell is no longer his son, says that the old shepherd will be killed, and threatens to have Perdita’s face “scratched with briars.” He tells Florizell that he is no longer heir to the throne of Bohemia.

Perdita tells Florizell he should leave, and says she is giving up on her dream of being with him. The shepherd is upset and angry at Perdita for mingling with the prince. Camillo tells Florizell to beware of Polixenes’ temper and not to appear before him “till the fury of his Highness settle.” Florizell agrees not to go see his father, and tells Perdita that he doesn’t care about losing his right of succession to the throne. He refuses to go back on his vow of love to Perdita and says that the two of them can run away from Bohemia together.

The mixed-up, topsy-turvy world of the play, a common feature of comedies, is reflected in all the festival’s disguises and costumes, with Autolycus, Polixenes, Camillo, and Florizell all pretending to be people they’re not. The concerns of this part of the play seem to be less grim or serious than those of the previous scenes in Sicilia.



The festival continues to be a source of comedic amusement, with the tricky Autolycus feigning sympathy for the shepherd’s son’s having been robbed, when he was the one who robbed the boy. This scene in particular draws many elements from the pastoral genre, with the shepherd’s son giving his beloved shepherdess a gift to show his affection.



The levity of the festival continues, though more serious matters are developing, as the disguised Polixenes learns about his son’s intentions with Perdita. Polixenes is concerned about his son’s dishonesty, but ironically he is the one sneaking around in disguise to learn about his son’s doings.



Florizell’s love for Perdita is in conflict with his familial love for his father. Polixenes feels betrayed and—like Leontes earlier—over-reacts. Thinking he is carrying out just and deserved punishments, he threatens Florizell, Perdita, and the shepherd cruelly.



The light-hearted festival has now been interrupted by the serious matter of Polixenes’ anger. Florizell agrees not to go see his father, because Polixenes likely cannot be persuaded to change his mind (just as Leontes remained stubborn in the early part of the play). Florizell is willing to leave both his father and his homeland to pursue his love for Perdita. A father’s stubbornness again causes him to lose his family.



Camillo talks to himself and realizes that he may be able to use Florizell's fleeing Bohemia to his advantage, by getting Perdita and him to flee to Sicilia. He speaks to Florizell and says that he has been a loyal subject of Polixenes, and will be loyal to Florizell. He encourages Florizell to go to Sicilia, where he says Leontes will be kind to him as a way of making up for his betrayal of Polixenes.

Camillo tells Florizell to tell Leontes that he comes from Bohemia as a representative of his father Polixenes' good will. He tells Florizell that Leontes must think Florizell is on good terms with his father. Florizell and Perdita agree with the plan, but Florizell worries about arriving in Sicilia with his shepherd's costume. Just then, Autolycus enters and brags to himself about how he sold all his cheap trinkets at the festival, and picked many people's pockets while he was at it.

Camillo promises to write letters of introduction for Florizell to Leontes. Then, he sees Autolycus and gets an idea. He asks Autolycus to change clothes with Florizell, and Autolycus agrees after a bit of protest. Camillo advises Perdita to disguise herself as well, so that she and Florizell can safely escape Bohemia. Speaking to himself, he says that he will tell Polixenes about Florizell and Perdita's escape to Sicilia, so that Polixenes will pursue them there and take Camillo with him, back to his homeland.

Perdita, Camillo, and Florizell leave. Alone, Autolycus says that he understands what is going on, but will not inform Polixenes, because he prefers dishonesty over honesty, and thinks, "this is the time that the unjust man doth thrive." The old shepherd and his son enter, carrying the box in which they found Perdita so long ago. The shepherd's son persuades his father to tell king Polixenes that Perdita is a "changeling" and not his daughter by birth. Since she is not his "flesh and blood," he has not technically offended the king through his daughter's relationship with the prince, and so perhaps Polixenes will pardon the shepherd.

The shepherd and his son plan to go to Polixenes' palace. Autolycus overhears them and, pretending to be a noble courtier, asks what business they have at the royal court, as well as what the box they are carrying is. He tells them that the king is not at his palace, but aboard a boat. Pretending not to recognize the shepherd and his son, he tells them that the king's son is rumored to have tried to marry a shepherd's daughter.

Camillo doesn't exactly behave dishonestly, but isn't entirely honest as he manipulates Florizell into going to Sicilia, hoping that this will give him an opportunity to return to his rightful place in his homeland.



Florizell is easily persuaded by Camillo to flee Bohemia for Sicilia. As Autolycus enters, he is still in a light-hearted, comic mood, somewhat out of place as things have recently taken a turn for the more serious. Though one could argue that the events now occurring are like a comedic echo of the tragic events of the first half of the play.



The exchange of Autolycus' and Florizell's clothing is a further example of how people and things in the play are out of order and reversed. These reversals keep on heightening until the resolution of the play.



While issues of dishonesty are normally serious throughout the play (resulting in Hermione's death and Florizell's expulsion from Bohemia, for example), the character Autolycus gives a more humorous example of dishonesty, with his petty tricks. The shepherd and his son hope that the truth about Perdita will be enough to persuade Polixenes to spare them and behave justly.



Autolycus continues to be a dishonest con-man of sorts, though his dishonesty seems to be without serious or tragic consequences, so far. The fact that Autolycus is wearing a nobleman's clothes (those of Florizell) heightens the sense of disorder and reversal of social hierarchies in this part of the play.



Autolycus says that the girl's father is sure to be killed, as well as the shepherd's son, who will be flayed alive, covered in honey and "set on the head of a wasps'-nest, and then stoned to death. He offers to take the shepherd and his son to Polixenes and tells them he will "tender your persons to his presence," and "whisper him in your behalfs." The shepherd gladly gives Autolycus some gold for promising to do this and promises to give him more once he has done it.

Autolycus' imagined punishments are comedic in their absurdity, but a serious matter of life or death for the shepherd and his son, who are tricked by Autolycus' lies.



Autolycus directs the shepherd and his son toward the seashore. They think their only hope is to tell Polixenes that Perdita is not actually the shepherd's daughter, and believe they are "blessed" to have found Autolycus. They leave ahead of Autolycus, who, alone on-stage, remarks how lucky he is. He plans to bring the shepherd and the shepherd's son to Florizell instead of the king, and thinks that Florizell will reward him for it.

In their eagerness to try to persuade Polixenes to pardon them, the shepherd and his son are completely fooled by Autolycus. They ironically thank him for saving them, when he is doing the opposite. This irony is humorous, though, as opposed to the tragic irony of Leontes betraying Hermione while accusing her of betrayal.



ACT 5, SCENE 1

At the court of Leontes in Sicilia, Cleomenes tells the king that he has "performed / A saintlike sorrow," has repented enough for causing Hermione's death, and should now remarry. Leontes is not sure that he can, and Paulina agrees that it would be disrespectful to Hermione's memory to do so. Dion tells the king that his not being married and not having an heir is dangerous for Sicilia. Paulina says that there's no one worthy to replace Hermione, and that the oracle from Apollo is being fulfilled, and Leontes will not have an heir "till his lost child be found."

From the humor and levity of the sheep-shearing festival, the play now jumps to Leontes' court, which is still dominated by mourning for Hermione and Leontes' lost (and dead) children. Cleomenes and Dion think that enough time has passed since Hermione's death and that Leontes has shown enough sadness. He is not persuaded by them, though, and instead listens to Paulina, whom he earlier ignored completely.



Leontes tells Paulina that he wishes he had taken her advice so long ago, so that Hermione would not have died. He resolves not to remarry, and says that if he remarried, the ghost of Hermione would come back to him and make him "murder her I married." He swears to Paulina that he will not marry anyone unless he has her permission. She says she will not let Leontes marry until his "first queen's again in breath."

Leontes is persuaded by Paulina and agrees not to remarry, choosing to honor his love for his late wife by not trying to replace her. He sees the idea of remarrying as a kind of betrayal of Hermione (who he already betrayed once through his unfounded suspicions).



A servant enters and announces that Polixenes' son Florizell has arrived with "his princess." Leontes wonders what has made them come to Sicilia without any prior notice. The servant says that the princess is the most beautiful person he has ever seen. Paulina chides the servant for forgetting the beauty of Hermione and the servant apologizes but insists on the beauty of Florizell's princess. Paulina says that is a shame Mamillius is not still alive, as he would have "paired well" with Florizell, who is the same age as Mamillius would have been.

Florizell lies to Leontes, but his dishonesty does not have serious consequences. Paulina is fixated on the past, thinking of both Hermione and Mamillius. The comparison of Perdita and Hermione's beauty is ironic, because Perdita is actually Hermione's own daughter. By coming to Sicilia, Perdita has unwittingly returned to her rightful, natural place in Sicilia and Leontes' home.



Florizell and Perdita enter, and Leontes remarks on how Florizell looks exactly like a young version of Polixenes. He welcomes Florizell, and Florizell says that he has come to Sicilia by the command of Polixenes. He says that Polixenes wanted to come see Leontes, but is too infirm to travel. He refers to Perdita as his wife and says that she is from Libya.

Leontes tells Florizell he has “a holy father,” against whom Leontes has “done sin.” He wishes he still had his son and daughter, “such goodly things” as Florizell and Perdita. Just then, a lord enters and says that Polixenes is in Sicilia, chasing after his son who has fled with a shepherd’s daughter. Camillo is with him, and on their way to the king’s court, they have found Perdita’s father (the shepherd) and the shepherd’s son, whom they threaten with death.

Florizell admits to Leontes that he and Perdita are not married and not “like to be.” Looking at Perdita, Leontes asks if she is the daughter of a king. Florizell says she only will be when she marries him. Florizell asks Leontes to be his “advocate,” and argue on his behalf to Polixenes. Leontes agrees to try to persuade Polixenes for Florizell, and they leave to find Polixenes.

ACT 5, SCENE 2

Elsewhere in Sicilia, Autolycus asks a gentleman about what happened with the Bohemian shepherd at Leontes’ court. The gentleman says that the shepherd showed the bundle in which he found Perdita, and that Camillo and Leontes reacted with an extreme display of emotion, and he could not tell whether it was “joy or sorrow.” Another gentleman enters and exclaims, “the oracle is fulfilled: the King’s daughter is found!”

Another gentleman enters, and the second gentleman asks him whether the news is true, saying, “this news which is called true is so like an old tale that the verity of it is in strong suspicion.” The third gentleman says that it is true, and that the bundle the shepherd displayed had in it Hermione’s mantle and a letter from Antigonus, proving Perdita’s true identity.

Leontes is able to see a young Polixenes again in Florizell, showing how having children can be a way of overcoming the inevitable process of aging. Florizell continues to lie, though he has been forced to by the dire situation his father has put him in.



Leontes laments his former mistreatment of Polixenes, and extends friendship and hospitality to his old friend’s son partially as an attempt to make up for his earlier unjust actions. Meanwhile, it is now Polixenes who is behaving cruelly and unjustly, as he threatens to kill the shepherd.



Even though she has been brought up as a shepherd’s daughter, Perdita’s natural status as a princess shows through her behavior. Whereas Leontes failed Polixenes as a friend, he now seizes the opportunity to be a good friend to Polixenes’ son and advocate on Florizell’s behalf.



The bundle in which Perdita was found was sufficient evidence to persuade everyone of Perdita’s real identity. The reactions of Camillo and Leontes mix extreme joy with sorrow, just as Shakespeare’s play does. The oracle is now revealed to have been true, as that which was lost (literally what Perdita’s name means) is found.



This crucial turn in the plot, with Perdita returned to her rightful place in Leontes’ court, takes place all because of physical evidence. This stands in great contrast to the inability of any evidence to persuade Leontes of Hermione’s innocence in the first part of the play.



The third gentleman says that Leontes and Polixenes reunited joyously, and Leontes begged for Polixenes' forgiveness. He says that the shepherd's son explained to everyone that Antigonus was "torn to pieces with a bear," and his ship was wrecked in a storm. He says that Paulina was caught between joy and sorrow: "she had one eye declined for the loss of her husband, another elevated that the oracle was fulfilled."

As the play moves toward its happy resolution, Leontes and Polixenes are reunited as friends, while Leontes and Perdita are reunited as father and daughter. Nonetheless, amid all this joy, Paulina must deal with the sorrow of knowing how her husband died. Joy is never without sadness in this play, which continually mixes the two.



The third gentleman says that Leontes "bravely confessed" to how he caused Hermione's death, and Perdita was greatly saddened at this news. He says that Perdita has gone to a statue that was made of Hermione to see at least the image of her mother. The gentlemen leave to go see Perdita examine the statue, since so many wonderful things have been happening, and "every wink of an eye some new grace will be born."

Just as Paulina had to balance both sorrow and joy, now Perdita's happiness at being reunited with her father is tempered with the sadness of learning about her mother's death.



Alone, Autolycus muses that he wanted to be the one to tell Leontes of the bundle that the shepherd had, but says that if he had revealed the secret, he probably wouldn't have been believed, because of his "other discredits." The shepherd and his son enter, both now dressed in rich clothes. The shepherd's son brags to Autolycus that he is now a gentleman, and Florizell called him his brother, while Perdita called the shepherd her father.

Autolycus guesses that his dishonest history would have made him unable to convince or persuade Leontes of anything. The shepherd and his son are now happily safe. While most characters are returning to their natural places, these two have suddenly been made into noblemen.



Autolycus asks the shepherd's son to give him "good report to the Prince," and pardon his earlier trickery. The shepherd tells his son to help Autolycus since, as he says, "we must be gentle now we are gentlemen." Autolycus promises to reform his behavior, and the shepherd's son says he will swear to Florizell that Autolycus is "as honest a true fellow as any is in Bohemia." He says that as a gentleman, it is fitting for him to swear such a thing on behalf of a friend, and Autolycus promises to be an honest, good man.

The shepherd's comment suggests that one's behavior is a natural extension of one's social identity, that noble gentlemen must naturally be gentle. Autolycus promises to reform and become an honest man, but it is highly possible that he is playfully deceiving the shepherd's son and has no intentions of changing his mischievous ways.



ACT 5, SCENE 3

Leontes, Polixenes, Florizell, Perdita, Camillo, and Paulina all go together to see the statue of Hermione, which is at Paulina's home. Paulina says that just as Hermione was unequalled in beauty, so her statue is unequalled. She tells everyone to get ready "to see the life as lively mocked as ever / Still sleep mocked death," and pulls back a curtain, revealing the statue of Hermione. Leontes is silent at first, and then remarks, "Chide me, dear stone, that I may say indeed / Thou art Hermione."

Now that Leontes is reunited with his daughter Perdita, his subject Camillo, and his friend Polixenes, he lacks only his deceased wife Hermione. The sight of her statue brings a mixture of emotions to Leontes, who is happy to see her beauty again, sad to remember her death, and amazed at the realistic quality of the statue.



Leontes remarks that the statue appears slightly more wrinkled than Hermione was, and Paulina says that the skilled sculptor made the statue so that, sixteen years later, it “makes her / As she lived now.” Leontes says that the statue pierces him to his soul, as it reminds him of his cruelty toward his now deceased wife. Perdita kneels before the statue to kiss its hand and “implore her blessing.” Paulina tells her to wait, as the paint on the statue is not dry.

Camillo and Polixenes try to calm Leontes down, and tell him that he has showed enough sorrow over his wife. Leontes says that the statue is so realistic that it appears to breathe and to have real blood coursing through its veins. Paulina says that she should cover up the statue, because it is affecting Leontes so much, and he will be “so far transported that / He’ll think anon it lives.” Leontes tells her not to cover the statue, and says he will kiss the statue’s lip. Paulina tries to stop him, saying he will smudge the paint on the statue.

Paulina stops Leontes and tells everyone to prepare “for more amazement.” She says that she will make the statue move, but worries that everyone will think she is “assisted / By wicked powers.” Leontes says that he wants to see the statue move, and Paulina calls out, “music, awake her! Strike!” She tells the statue to “be stone no more,” and the statue starts to move.

Paulina tells everyone not to be afraid, as her spell is “lawful.” Hermione embraces Leontes, and everyone remarks that she seems to be alive. Paulina tells Hermione that her daughter Perdita has been found. Hermione says that she “preserved” herself in the hopes of seeing her daughter one day, because the oracle gave her hope that Perdita would live.

Hermione asks where Perdita has been living, but Paulina tells her there will be time to learn everything later. She encourages everyone to enjoy their good fortune, and tells them, “go together, / You precious winners all.” She says she, meanwhile will spend the rest of her life lamenting the death of her husband Antigonus.

Time seems to age everything in the play, including the statue of Hermione. However, it is possible that Paulina has deceived everyone and the statue is actually Hermione in disguise, who may have only pretended to die. The sight of his wife’s likeness reminds Leontes painfully of his unjust betrayal of her.



Once again friends of Leontes, Camillo and Polixenes try to reason with him and persuade him to calm down. Leontes is too strongly moved by the sight of the statue, though, and the memory of his love for Hermione, to listen to them. His remarks about how lifelike the statue is gain an added level of irony if the statue is actually Hermione herself, if it is a real human being pretending to be a statue.



The play began as a tragedy, and turned into a comedy with elements of pastoral. Now the miraculous transformation of the statue lends the play’s conclusion a fantastical element, as well. (But again, it is possible Paulina has lied, and the statue was Hermione all along, and that Hermione was just waiting for Leontes to fully repent before returning to him.)



The play has now miraculously reached a happy conclusion, as Leontes’ family is back in order, and he is reunited with his beloved wife. Hermione’s vague language about “preserving” herself keeps the precise nature of the statue ambiguous, whether it was a miraculous return or she was never actually a statue.



Nearly all the characters have been reunited with their friends and loved ones, and have arrived at a happy resolution to the problems of the play. Paulina, however, is left to mourn her husband; she is the one tragic character left in this comedic ending.



Leontes tells Paulina not to be sad, and says that she should take a new husband. He suggests that she wed Camillo, who he says has proved his “worth and honesty.” Leontes begs pardon from both Hermione and Polixenes that he ever suspected the two of them had an affair. He tells Hermione that their daughter is engaged to Polixenes’ son Florizell. He suggests that everyone should go and fill each other in on what each person has done in the sixteen years since Hermione’s supposed death, and everyone leaves the stage together.

By encouraging Paulina to move on from her tragic past, and look toward a happier future, Leontes is also encouraging the play itself to fully become a comedy. The engagement between Florizell and Perdita joins them in love, while also cementing the re-established friendship between their two fathers, with which the play began.





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